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S.L. Bhyrappa

PARVA

A TALE OF WAR, PEACE, LOVE, DEATH, GOD, AND MAN

Translated By
K.Raghavendra Rao

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A Modern Kannada Classic

PARVA

A Tale of War, Peace, Love, Death, God, and Man

Dr. S.L. Bhyrappa
Translated into English by
K. Raghavendra Rao

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Foreword

(Written for original Kannada edition)

My thinking about the historical veracity of the events of the Mahabharata began about twenty years ago, and took an interim shape during a discussion I had with Dr. Narayanappa in 1966 in ChiKarnagalur. He had tried several times earlier to persuade me to write a novel based on the Mahabharata. The following year, when I was roaming round in the Gadhwal area in the Himalayan region, I had the occassion to spend some time in a small hamlet which practised polyandry. The local folk believed that this custom had been in existence since the time of Draupadi. The practice was predominant in the rural areas of two Taluks. Later I visited Pandukeshwar, nestling in the greenland between Badri and Joshismath, where I learnt the details about the local customs and history. It was then that I began to conceive hazily some of the characters in the Mahabharata. From 1971 on, I was deeply engaged in serious research pertaining to the historicity of the epic. After a thorough reading of the original Vyasa version of the text, I undertook a deep investigation into the economic, political, religious and social life during the last phase of the Vedic culture. After a study stretching over five years, in 1974 toured and briefly lived in those parts of the Himalayan region which were associated with the Mahabharata. Subsequently in 1975,I visited and studied Dwaraka, Aravali ranges, Viratanagar, Mathura, Delhi, Kurukshetra, Hastinavati, Barnava, Chakranagara, Rajgir and other places connected with the epic. But prior to this study tour and investigation, I armed myself with the necessary knowledge, thanks to the help of Dr. Ramesh, then with-the Mysore unit of the Archaelogical Survey of India. Mrs Leela, incidentally a granddaughter of the great teacher and scholar, A.R. Krishnasastry, who was on the staff of the Library of Mysore University, assisted me generously with relevant books and documents. Throughout my researches, Shri N. Balasubrahmanya; played a key role in helping me clarify my ideas on the subject, through intense discussions. At one stage, such help flowed from Pa.Vem. Acharya. Experts like Dr. J.J. Thaker, Acharya Devendraji Sharma, and Dr. H.A. Phadke, provided me with historical data pertaining respectively to Dwaraka, Viratnagar and Kurukshetra. In Delhi, Dr. B.V.Subbarayappa, Chief Editor, the Indian Council of History of Science, placed at my disposal very useful material.

I completed writing this novel between 12 October 1975 and 27 December 1976, covering a period of one year and two months. Some

of the early portions were written in a room in the Vedanta College of the Ramakrishna Ashrama in Mysore. Later M.S.K. Prabhu, Prabhushankar and N. Balasubrahmanya read the manuscript. These friends enabled me to gain a critical perspective on my own work. When I was wrestling hard to pick on a suitable title for the novel, Ha.Ma. Nayak, helped me to settle on the title, Parva. He also looked after the printing layout. I am genuinely grateful to all these good friends.

Both during the preparatory stage and the writing stage, a number of well-wishers extended to me their helping hand, directly or indirectly. In this connection I may refer to a long article of mine, which gives a detailed account of my preparatory research and the various ideas that dominated me at different stages, as also the actual writing of the work itself. Since it would be unfair to inflict that work on my readers here, and it is a long 50 to 60 pages stuff, I shall content myself by publishing separately that material under the title, "Why do I write?" . However, I do think it would not be out of order here, to focus on some important issues discussed there.

"I must confess that I have no adequate evidence to confirm or disconfirm, beyond dispute the existence of Dwaraka, referred to by Dr. Thaker. Moreover, that is not a matter of interest to me. In the backdrop of the scholarly material I had read and digested regarding Lothal, Harappa and Mohanjo Daro, I think Krishna's Dwaraka is at least plausible. Having travelled in this area, and watched the scene from the tower of the Light- house on the coast, I am ready to say that I found myself going back to the days of the Yadavas, released from the restraints of 1975. The town of Dwaraka as it must have been then, the sea, the life of its inhabitants, and its physical environment, became a part of my personal experience. While dealing with events of his own time, a writer has no problem with factual details. They are already there, present in him subconsciously. He need only recall them to serve his contingent purposes. But historical details do not enjoy the status of being subjectively so immediate and internal. They persist as objective scholarly data, resisting any internalisation. But Dwaraka had become part of my internal experience... I felt as if I had actually been there in Dwaraka, and knew like the back of my hand its streets and lanes. I felt confident that I could negotiate them without difficulty and with skill.

"Near a place called Viratnagar in Jaipur district, where the fight over Gograhana, a minor Kurukshetra, had occurred, there is a cave called Bhima's cave... It is a local custom for newly-weds even today to visit the caveand offer worship to Bhima. At the time I was visiting it, a newly-wed couple were also visiting it. I asked the new groom about the purpose of this worship. Straight came the reply: 'Should anyone cast his eyes on my wife, God Bhima will grant me the power

to finish him off'... In these areas, the written story of the Mahabharata blends nicely with the life-practices of the people. Though the incident of Keechaka's death may not be true, it has taken firm root in people's belief. The belief is true. What then is the sort of truth an imaginative writer should be after? Don't we all feel instinctively that we should destroy anyone who violates the chastity or modesty of his wife? Do not even the Western males behave in this way? This timeless, universal male instinct or male pride, leading to male dominance, can it not be a literary truth?

"What is the real meaning of the term Aksohini? We get nowhere a precise answer to this question... Hence refusing to be dragged into a futile debate over an undecidable matter, I merely computed the size of the armies involved in the Mahabharata War by looking at the size of the war-area. It was clearly a size hitherto unknown to the Aryan people... Why did all the rulers of Aryavarta participate in this war? The traditional Mahabharata calls this a Dharma Yuddha, the War of Righteousness. Yet the righteous Pandavas commanded the support of far fewer rulers than the unrighteous. The majority of the rulers could have opted out, regarding the war as none of their business. But the Aryan kings were addicted to gambling, warring and womanising. That is why they would rush to a Svayamvara. They were made of such stuff. These were the sort of ideas and thoughts that drifted into my head, while I was going through the roads of Kurukshetra in a rickshaw in the company of Dr. Phadke. It was then I made the mental note that the war reflected the nature of the Aryan people as well as that of the peoples affected by their way of life.... On the day I started writing this novel, 12 October 1975,1 barely managed to finish a page. The second day was slightly better witha tally of three pages. It was only after ten pages or so that I got into the swing of it, my pace accelerating and my absorption total. In creating literary works, it is a mistake to draw a distinction between the directly experienced and the indirectly perceived. After all, whatever I write is directly experienced by me. Maybe a detail here or there, a word here or there, my not appear to be so experienced. But the basic material comes out only as a result of intense subjective pressure. In so far as this material is concerned, there is no historical disjunction between this time here and that time there, the subjective time and the objective time... I was aware all along that I was not giving exact copies of the characters of the original Mahabharata, but only the different facets and forms of human nature and human relationships. Whenever I innovated a new character or a new situation, I could see the dimension of this novelty...

"The novel that was gestating within me emerged out of me eventually as something different from what had been conceived from time to time. This applies both to its form and meaning... The experience of writing Parva gave me a new sense of things, a new

feeling about everything, a new birth as it were. Practice and habit are the grounds of most of our beliefs. When we abandon them in order to view life from the perspective of its terminal point of death, we reach out to a new awareness of human potentialities and actualities, and gain a new vision, a new illumination... How old am I now? How many more years have I yet to go? Is there any meaning I can scoop out of the years remaining for me here on earth? These questions and reflection on them have served as a drone of three notes to the music of this novel, and they have sounded deep down in my mind and heart."

— S.L. Bhyrappa
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Acknowledgements

I am indebted of Prof. K. Raghavendra Rao who has successfully accomplished the challenging task of rendering a work like Parva into English, which is being published under the Sahitya Akademi scheme of rendering modem classics in the different Indian languages into English.

I am grateful to Dr. Pradhan Gurudatta, Reader, Institute of Kannada Studies, Manasagangotri, University of Mysore, Mysore-6, and to Prof. N. Balasubrahmanya, Retired Professor of English, University of Mysore, Mysore, who have made editorial emendations, in addition to reading the final proofs.

— S.L. Bhyrappa

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Translator's Note

I must confess that, despite the formidable challenges and hazards, I have enjoyed working on this translation. I have tried to be totally faithful to the original, producing virtually a word for word translation, but without losing its essential spirit and gusto. Perhaps paradoxically, perhaps not, I have tried to produce a work which is meant to read like an English novel in its own right. I hope I have achieved to some extent the impossible, reconciling the irreconcilable aims of producing a literal translation and producing a creative work. There is no way I can express adequately my gratitude to my wife,Prabha, who not only sustained me physically during the months I slogged at it, but also helped me at every step with her expertise and scholarship in Kannada language and literature. Indeed it would be honest to say that she has acted as more than a co-translator. I must thank the author of the original Kannada novel itself, Dr.S.L. Bhyrappa, for regarding me as a reasonably good choice for the job and for enduring my silences and vagaries as a correspondent. I can only hope that he will have no occasion to regret his choice.

Special thanks are due to Dr. H.M.Nayak who played a major role in the process by which I was transformed into a translator of the novel.

I want to place on record the encouragement given during the darkest moments of this enterprise by my good friends, Dr. S.K.Desai, Dr. G.S.Amur, Dr. Shankar Mokashr Ptrnekar, Professor K.J. Shah, Shri Channaveera Kanavi, and my newly acquired in-law, Shri G.R. Huilgol.

I owe very special thanks to Dr.G.S. Amur who was kind enough to give the entire text a thorough scrutiny and saved it from quite a few inaccuracies and infelicities. If some of these persist, the blame is wholly mine.

My children, Bhimu, Gopi, Madhu and Vaiju, showed exemplary filial solicitude in letting me carry on the job without any demands on my time, energy or even affection during the months when I wrestled with the task.

One last but not least acknowledgement. I must thank my good friend ähd former colleague Dr.C.N. Ramachandran of Mangalore University, a distinguished scholar in English and Kannada, for shaping my sensibility and literary competence in many perceptible and imperceptible ways.

— K. Raghavendra Rao

—•✳•—

to Gowramma,

my mother, nay,

the very fountain head of my creativity,
who, while grinding Raagi grain,

sang to me verses from
the Jaimini and Kumaaravyaasa Bharatas;

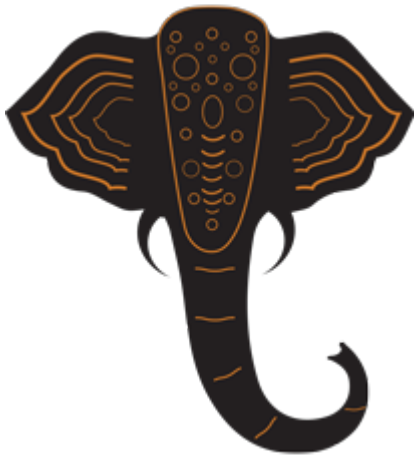
explained their meaning to me,
while feeding me with Raagi bread;

who, during her rare moments of leisure,
wrote poems herself,
read them to me and shared them with me;

who appreciated the improvements I suggested,
and nurtured me;

and who left me when I was eleven
to remain alive as a memory.

PART ONE



Chapter 1

THE territory between the rivers Chandrabhaga and Iravathy was referred to as the land of the Madra people. Salya was its ruler, now an old man.

Drawing his grand-daughter closer, he asked, "Can you guess how old I am now?"

The girl who had just turned twenty replied, "Grandpa, there is none older than you."

The old man said, "Yet when I walk, my back doesn't bend, my waist doesn't sag. I can walk straight and stiff even now. Do you know why?"

The girl smiled with pride, saying, "Because you are so strong, so lasting and durable."

Laughing, as his now thinning beard shook, he said, "No, it is because we are old-timers, belonging to ancient times."

The girl said, "Whenever you talk of old times, you refer to 'we' and 'us'. Tell me how many are you?"

The old man answered, "How can one count people precisely? Roughly all those of my age."

The girl, "But you know that we have none as old as you in our palace."

He, 'Well, they are there in other palaces, and also ordinary folk outside the palaces. They are all rough and hardy, all old-timers."

She, "But tell me why is this so?"

The old man explained, "You see, it is all due to their method and system of life. They did not live the way you, the new generation live. You see, you are all eager to abandon old paths of the land and the tribe we belong to. You are all so ready to copy alien ways of life."

Even as he was speaking the girl interrupted to say, "Grandpa, you seem to have forgotten that we had made an agreement that we should never refer to this issue, and you have forgotten it so soon

after we made it!"

The old man muttered, "Yes, yes, why should I talk with you about such matters beyond your control. Let your father return from his gambling session. I shall discuss them with him. But God knows when he will be back. No. No. I have said it hundred times. I shall tell him now after thrashing his backfill the nerves get knotted."

And the man who guffawed a few moments before, vibrating his beard, now became grave, and said, "Look here, by this time you should have married and become a mother of one or two sons. Following your father's wishes, you have remained a maid yet. What sense is there in this?"

Hiranyavati was well aware that if she opposed him on this issue, the old man would boil with rage. It wasn't at all unlikely that he would even raise his hand and pummel her back. And they were strong, thick and large hands, too. Yet she found her father's views more congenial. She was bemused that the old man was under the illusion that her father had gone to gamble, but she knew the truth. Mother had whispered in her ear the previous night the truth. Well, she hoped that the purpose of his journey would be realised. That evening there were to be two more ritual offerings to the God of Fire.

The old man spoke, half-audible, more to himself, "Twenty cartloads of copper, brass, garments and ornaments would have come to us. Such a perfect beauty you are, my girl."

This enraged the girl further.

She ruminated, "Yes I am perfect all right. Girls from our land are reputed to be beauties. Their faces are round and bright like the moon the day after fullness."

She remembered seeing her face in the polished metal surface. Even so, was it right to sell girls for bride-price? Because of this custom we are looked down upon by other folks, the Kurus, the Panchalas, the Surasena, the Chedi, Kashi and Virata people, in fact, all people in the North- East. Yes, father is right. The eastern and the southern people do it differently and do it better. They arrange for the Svayamvara type of marriage in which the girl's folk offer the winning contestant the girl's hand, with cartloads of gifts. This would mean a place of self-respect in the husband's household, a glory to her own tribe. Or a handsome Ksatriya prince of impeccable pedigree should arrive in a splendid chariot, love her and then elope with her to the whirring rhythm of the chariot-wheels, the dust they raised, a real successful escape-run, the heroic defeating of the pursuing father and grandpa. Has the grandpa the strength to pursue the fleeing couple? He walks straight, back straight and waist upright.

Coming out of her reverie, she suddenly asked the old man, "Grandpa, how old are you?"

The old man, "You surely are a smart one to distract me from the main issue. Why do you repeat the same question?"

"No, I am asking because you have never told me your exact age."

The old man, "Well, today you shall have it. I am eighty-four years to date."

"But how do you keep count of the years passed?" she asked.

The old man said "How? well, let me see...", raising his eyes to the beams of honne wood in the ceiling, "— let me see, I am thirty six years younger than Bhishma. I learn that he is now one hundred and twenty years old. Which means, I shall be... Well, count on your fingers yourself."

Placing her long, slender, red fingers on a palm sharply etched with lines, the girl began to count. But before she could arrive at the result, yet another doubt gnawed at her, "How do you know that Bhishma is one hundred and twenty years old?" But seeing her grandfather's frowning, displeased face, she added defensively, "You see, the reason why I asked this question is because this Bhishma you are talking about never came to our town, to our country. You also never went to his land."

These words plunged the old man into deep gravity. Noticing this mood through the old man's sharp wrinkles, the girl thought it wise not to pursue the matter. By this time she had made her counting and found that one hundred and twenty minus thirty-six came to eighty-four. She thought, "So very old is our grandpa!"But that Bhishma was even older by thirty-six. She asked herself, "How much older and bigger than grandpa should be Bhishma?" Suddenly something flashed in her memory, and she asked, "Please, grandpa don't get angry. I know that Bhishma had journeyed to our palace to ask our grandma's hand in marriage for his brother. Of course, I was not born then. But was father already born at that time?"

Grandpa spoke no further, but the girl had no idea why. He got up, opened the door and went out. The summer heat had scorched the trees in the gardens. The town of Shakala, and indeed the whole of Madra, had never suffered from scarcity of water. Yet in the burning summer, how can there be enough water to quench the thirst of the trees? Even the trees beyond the gardens also stood wholly dried up. How many more months for the rains to come? Though the sun had set, the small rocks and stone slabs were hot. He felt that, being king, he should not squat on the bare ground. His servant followed him with a mattress woven of dry elephant grass. After it was unrolled,

old king Salya ordered the servant to leave. Then he sat quiet and all alone, in the arrested air which had silenced even insects and birds. His neck, forehead and chest were all sticky with sweat. The rain should come this month itself, he thought. He muttered to himself, in a low but rhythmic cadence a vedic hymn addressed to Parjanya, the Rain God:

> Mahantam kosam uda ca nisinca
> Syandantām kulyāviṣitām purastāt
> Ghrtena dyāvāpṛthivi vyundhi
> Suprapānam bhavantyaghnyabyah

Kindly send us clouds dark and swollen
Let rivers flow east inundated
Soak this world and also the celestial one with water pure
Let all the cattle get waters clear to drink to their fill.

When the rain poured drumming the earth, first it would soak the shoulders, arms, head and back, killing heat sores, bringing peace. A whole cycle of years had passed since Bhishma had taken away his sister. He had not come again to look up his relatives. Salya thought that during that year he came once to demonstrate the bonds of kinship. He had entered the town, leaving his army camp outside its precincts, came to the palace, with haughtiness, asked a bride for Vichitraveerya's son, behaving as if he was doing them a favour.

He had asked Bhishma, "... Bhishma, I do consider it a great privilege and good fortune to offer my sister to the Kuru family. But I have been informed that your brother Pandu has already married the daughter of king Sura, and the adopted daughter of Kuntibhoja. While a first and senior wife is there, what happiness can my sister really enjoy?"

Bhishma with a voice as deep and strong and large as his body, had answered, "How can a woman who, even after three years of married life, did not become pregnant even once retain seniority among wives? Tell me, Madra King. Don't you know that in a pure Aryan family a wife's position is determined by the children she delivers, especially male ones? Women from your land are known for wombs fertile enough to yield at least ten sons without any doubt. In beauty, they are matchless." These words boosted his own pride. But even her beauty had faded from his memory, and the years had revolved. Yet she was beautiful, and, of course, every Madra woman was a beauty.

Salya wiped away the sweat with the upper cotton garment he was

wearing. He had asked Bhishma, "Oh Bhishma, you are aware of our custom in these matters?"

Bhishma had replied, "Oh yes. I know that as you go west from our Kuru land brides are not given without bride-price. You want the bride's price to be evaluated properly, don't you? I have ready for delivery twenty cartloads of goods and gifts. Copper vessels, garments of cotton, silk and wool, one plateful of gold coins, and let me add that the Kuru coins are minted from the purest gold, not like the ones you produce here in the west."

What wealth the Kurus commanded! Their capital Hastinavati enjoyed the reputation of being the richest city in the world. Yes, matrimonial relationship with a wealthy clan was forged. But after that Bhishma did not care to visit them even once! He never treated Salya as an equal. He went off with a maiden. After that his sister did not visit her natal home even once, not even when sent for, out of anger that she had been given to an impotent husband. Which Madra woman would not get angry if a husband who was not filled with semen was tied to her in marriage? Semen should pour like rain, to quench the thirst, to give peace.

At that moment, a bevy of bewitching girls carrying huge water-filled mud-pots approached. They sprinkled water generously all over the ground in the garden. No sooner did they sprinkle water than the parched earth drank it up dry. The girls had to bring water again and again to sprinkle over dried-up earth.

The old king shouted, "Oh, servants, keep on pouring water incessantly."

The leader of the gang said, "It would create a slush."

The king answered her, "Let it be. Let the earth get wet."

As he uttered his command, the girls began to sprinkle water with vigour, letting the water sieve through their right palms held across the mouths of the pots. The air became soothing, cooled by the water. As soon as the girls departed, the king's mind returned to imagine and visualise the Kuru wealth. How many elephants! How many cows! How many chariots and horses! How many utensils! They had no earthen pots, all copper vessels. And gold accumulated over countless generations, dominated by figures like (here he counted with his fingers) Rishtisena, Pratapa, Dilipa, Bhimasena, Riksha, Devatithi, Akrodhana, and he stopped at this name, unable to go beyond. A huge rock blocked the memory and behind it many generations were hidden. He scoured his memory for the name of the low-caste herald who had visited and told them about the founder of Hasthinavati, whose name was Hastina, who was believed to be of forty generations preceding Bhishma. What immensity of

wealth must have piled up in all these years in that city! He wished that they, too, could find out an appropriate heraldic group to get them to sing the glory of the Madra clan. As the water that soaked the earth cooled the air, insects piercing the body began to disappear.

As Salya, yawning, stretching his arms, was flexing his body, his grand-daughter arrived to announce, "Grandpa, father has just returned." The grand-father asked her to send him there.

Soon his son Rukmaratha joined him. Looking much younger than his fifty years, the son, adjusting his upper garment, stood before his father, bowed with reverence and touched the ground in salutation. After his father had sniffed his head, he sat down two steps away from the old man.

The father, "Haven't you been away for a fortnight now, Rukmaratha?"

Son, "Yes, father."

Father, "How much did you gamble away? What were the goods you gambled away?"

Son, "No, sir. I am not a losing gambler. I did not win much, certainly. But my trip was for something else, and gambling was a mere pretext, father."

Father, "Well, what was this work of the State you went for?"

The son, "You shouldn't get angry that what I want to do would involve giving up our tribal customs and traditions."

Father, "I presume it is about arranging a Svayamvara mode of marriage for your daughter. Right?"

Son, "Father, you seem to be omniscient."

Father, "All right. We are now more wealthy. Have your way, set up a Svayamvara and then send wedding gifts. Look, it must be done with alacrity .The girl has already menstruated fifty times after attaining maturity. If the juices of fertility in the womb are not given the chance to blend with the semen, the time involved is counted sinning. Do you realise that for the sin of wasting her fifty menstruations, you, I and your grand-father may very well be consigned to hell?"

Son, "Father, what you say is true. But Svayamvara requires lot of wealth. It involves inviting princes from many lands — not only princes but even kings. Then the expense of their hospitality, their presents, wedding gifts, and so on. It would amount to spending of immeasurable resources. It took me a fortnight to make the arrangements. You know that we are not Kurus and Panchalas or the

kings of Kashi and Magadha to command the facility of drawing on the coffers ".

The father, "Well, don't you see? If we lack their wealth and resource, why should we follow their practice? Let us follow our practice of bride-price. Then wealth would come in, not go out. It would also save the girl's fertility period from going to waste. To prevent an out-of-wedlock conception, you had to torture the girl with monstrous discipline. Don't you see the immense futility and folly of all this?"

The son remained silent. The father naturally inferred that the son had no answer, and encouraged by this silence, he pressed further, "The central and supreme moral law for us is that it is the highest sin to waste a woman's period of fertility. I consider it my duty to enforce this law, not to tolerate any transgression of this law."

The son, "Look, father. You have not seen the world beyond the Madra country. The reputation of our Madra women's beauty and physical attraction has spread far and wide. But people also refer disapprovingly to the great sexual freedom enjoyed by our women. Should you tell them in the eastern lands that you hail from Madra,they would ask you to take them to Madra where they hint that they would enjoy the very heaven. I think we should try to counter such questionable reputation."

The father raised his voice, "These are our land's customs and traditions. We have no right to condemn them as improper."

Yet, the old man's voice contained no real anger. The son did not find it necessary to reply. He had realised that his father's opposition had weakened during the last two years. All that the old man now wanted was a speedy marriage, let it be of any form, even Svayamvara. Whenever his daughter menstruated, his father would count it as one life-time of hell. It would pain him, even anger him. Sometimes it also scared him. Of course, in the heart of his heart, he, the son, too, was scared. But if out of fear he adopted the bride-price practice and not Svayamvara, and sent off his daughter to her husband's home without any pomp and ceremony, how could it enhance the reputation and status of their clan?

Father, "All right. So you went to arrange for the Svayamvara under the pretext of going out to gamble. Tell me what were the things you did."

Son, "I must confess that right now we are not in a position to conduct a Svayamvara."

Father, "There you are. Didn't I tell you that any effort to transcend the clan custom would invite hundreds of obstacles!" His voice was

now raised somewhat. Now the voice had also acquired a sharp edge of anger.

The son, unruffled, spoke in an even tone, "Followed by chariots, horses and fifty archers I had gone to the Trigarta country. Its king Susharma is an old friend of mine. Svayamvara is all right, he said, but if only our western kings and princes assembled for it. Otherwise, it wouldn't amount to much in terms of prestige. Kuru, Panchala, Kashi, Magadha and Chedhi representatives from one side, and then from the other, princes from Vidarbha, Dwaraka now in the hands of Yadavas, and, in fact, representatives from all directions — Indra, Agni, Yama and Vayavya — should participate. The Brahmanas and specialists in sacred rituals from Kuru, Panchala, should all come. Then the Svayamvara will turn out to be great and glorious. You please start the preparations. I shall send the material needed for providing grand hospitality to the guests. However, right now none from the eastern lands is in a position to come."

The old ruler queried, "Why, what has happened?"

The son, "You know that old feud of Hastinavati between the progeny of Dhritarashtra and Pandu. Pandu's children have completed twelve years of stay in forest and one year of incognito life... You see the two are involved in a war, and..."

He stopped mid-way, interrupted by the old man, who asked, "By the way where did they spend their incognito year?"

The son, "Nearby in Virata city."

Father, "You know the proverb that the thief hides himself behind the front door is very true!"

The son, "Duryodhana thought that they would do this in a far away place. Imagining that they would live incognito in the land of their in-law Drupada or in distant Dwaraka of their friend Krishna, he sent spies to these places. He also sent men towards the Himalayas to spot them. Now they have finished the required thirteen years of exile, and they are asking for their kingdom back. When they sent a messenger asking for it, Duryodhana sent the blunt reply that he wouldn't return it!"

"Once they taste land and woman none will be ready to part with them, "the old man said with a toothless laugh.

The son, "It was not merely a question of enjoying the right of possession. No, Duryodhana seems to have based his refusal on a more fundamental ground. He argued that only he and his thirteen brothers, and one sister were all born to the true Kuru lineage as children of Dhritarashtra. He claimed that the five Pandavas were not really born to the Kuru seed. He asserted that Pandu's wives

produced children impregnated by passing strangers. Therefore, they had no right to call themselves Kauravas. He even held that it was a mistake, in the first place, to have given them the Khandavaprastha territory, but he could right this wrong through winning it in the game of dice. He argued with his elders that they should not once again wrong this right!"

The father, angry and perhaps half- comprehending, "What did Duryodhana say?"

The son, "He claimed that the five were not born to their father's seed, and that their mothers conceived and delivered them after intercourse with utter strangers. Thus they were not strictly Kauravas and they had no official status in the Kaurava's kingdom!"

The old man's brain stopped functioning for a while. There was the monotonous drone of the dark night inside. Out there was a faint moonlight. What was the day today?, he asked himself. The fifth day of the bright half. Slowly adjusting to the darkness, wiping his face gently, he said, "What nonsense! They did not produce children by illicit intercourse with nobodies and anybodies. They gave children according to accepted Niyoga principle. It was Pandu himself who ordered his wives to practise Niyoga in order to perpetuate the lineage. They did everything perfectly in accordance with the established moral code. Duryodhana is a cheat. Unwilling to part with the land, he is cooking up such unethical pretexts. Send our army. Let us hurry to the support of Pandavas, kill the wicked Duryodhana and re-establish the kingdom of the supreme moral law, the Dharma."

The son, "Look here, father. Nowadays you simply shout and scream to no purpose. Why do you do this?"

The father, "What else can one do but get angry when what is Dharma is called Adharma and what is Adharma as Dharma? Good Lord, you are so quiet. Do you agree with Duryodhana's words?"

The son, "It is true that he pursued these arguments in order to avoid returning their land. Yet I wonder whether there would not be a difference between being born to the lineage seed, and to other seeds, even if with the husband's approval and knowledge."

The father, "In the eyes of supreme moral law, the Dharma, there is no difference, absolutely none. You must be committed to Dharma."

The son had no immediate answer to this question. The lips of the old man were trembling with anger. Mistaking the son sitting before him to be Duryodhana himself, the old man half-raised his hands to thrash, but realising the mistake, immediately withdrew the hand. When a cool breeze blew he realised the existence of sweat

accumulated on his neck, chest and back. As he was vigorously wiping it with a rag, it suddenly flashed to him." If that is so, Duryodhana's father Dhritarashtra, Pandava's father Pandu, were both born through the Niyoga practice. That too after the father's death and without his permission. Their wives received alien seeds merely in the name of their husband. Then, couldn't we say that Duryodhana also does not belong to the Kuru lineage?"

The son asked, "Can one become someone's son merely through faith and commitment?"

Their words collided and splintered in the silence. One's question bypassed the other's comprehension. The result: none had an answer for the other's question. Both sat still and silent for a while. They could see the oil-lamp in the palace burning in silence. Meanwhile Rukmaratha yawned thrice in rapid succession. The father said, "You are very tired after the journey. Now you may go and rest." The son got up, passed the father's palace and reached his own palace. After eating the rice cooked in milk, he went out to sleep on the cotton mattress spread over a grass mat on a wooden plank placed on the cool ground in the open yard. The old king slept on his cotton mattress. He was a widower. Though there were lovely servant-maids at his service, he had stopped summoning them to his bed for several years now. He would not even touch them. As he lay facing the high and wide sky, holed by bright twinkling stars, he remembered Bhishma. Bhishma was reputed to be most knowledgeable in the moral and religious laws among all the Ksatriya communities inhabiting eastern, western, southern and northern lands. It was Bhishma himself, none other, who had arranged for the Niyoga maternity for his dead brother's wives, and helped perpetuate the lineage. Without any hesitation he had accepted the children of Pandu as his grandchildren. Now this Duryodhana, greedy and selfish, had resorted to the ruse of false Dharma'. Idiot! Idiot! In the presence of the stars shining high above, he felt the depth of his commitment to the moral and religious laws. As he turned to one side, there was a sudden anger against the son." What the devil are these youngsters up to? Bride-price is disgraceful, pre-marital conception for a girl is immoral, Niyoga practice is illegitimate! So, does it mean that the ways of our ancestors are wrong? Idiot! Idiot! What now prevents him from organising the Svayamvara? How can the war over there between Pandavas and sons of Dhritarashtra be a reason for our postponing the Svayamvara here? Well, let me get things sorted out with him in the morning." Then the old man was asleep. It was always the case with King Salya. Sleep had never been a real problem for him. But now with old age, he would abruptly awake in the mid-night, but after a short interval he would return to a deep and heavy sleep. During the brief time of waking, he enjoyed sliding slowly into sleep as he watched the sky above and the stars,

figuring out their positions and location in the vast blue above. It was only during winters when he was forced to sleep indoors that the return to sleep was problematic and wakefulness turned into a heavy load pulling him backwards into time.

Hiranyavathi, the grand-daughter, lay sleepless on the terrace, surrendering her body to the cool breeze blowing across her. She recalled what her father, returning from Trigarta had told her mother — "The Kurus were preparing for war. That would be no ordinary war. It was a war drawing into it rulers from the eastern and western lands. Already countless men with chariots, horses and soldiers on foot, had started off towards the battlefield. In such a tumultous situation, who has the time or inclination to indulge in a Svayamvara? This meant no suitors from the eastern and western lands would be available, only those from Panchala, Kekaya and Gandhara kingdoms would come. Father felt that the Svayamvara under these conditions would not attain any great status or dignity. Mother was sad and depressed. But is she as miserable as I? Even in this summer heat she is there inside sleeping with father! Here I am guarded like a prisoner by old servant maids. Stars are out in the sky, twinkling their eyes. Svayamvara would havemeanfthrill. A powerful youth bulging with muscles would carry me away on a horse, enveloped in dust, holding me tight to his chest! Oh, the bliss of it all, the huge Svayamvara Pandal, thronged with crowned heads from different countries, and all there for me to choose from, freely! Yes, father is right. Yet how many long years of waiting!"Then she rolled and tried to sleep. No, sleep refused to come." Yes, grandfather's words made sense. How can father claim to know better than grand-father about matters of morality and religion? Why is it wrong to have children before marriage? Wouldn't it benefit a man if he gets atone stroke children along with a wife. All the servant maids are of this opinion. But father is adamant that in his palace this custom should be banned. And he has set these watch-dogs over me." Again she rolled. Abruptly she sat up. The old servant-maid keeping vigil on the steps rushed to her in fright. The girl reassured her, "Don't be scared. I did not get up to run away with a man. I want water." She drank quickly water cooled in a mud pot, handed over to her by the servant. As soon as she drank water, the heat in the body evaporated in no time, and sweat soaked her. Uneasily, she went to sleep.

The servant put the vessel down close to her, and, gently passing her hand across the girl's face, said, "You can't sleep, am I right? At your age I had already delivered two children."

Hiranyavathi did not answer, but slowly closed her eyes.

The servant continued, "If a woman cannot sleep, rolling in agony, even the Gods will refuse the sacrificial offering. When the rulers

themselves go against the moral law, how can there be rain and harvest? How can cows have their udders burst with milk? How can women conceive, people multiply, one becoming ten, ten hundred and hundred thousand? The horses, too, ..."

She was interrupted by the sound of somebody climbing the terrace-steps. The sound of heavy feet told them both that Hiranyavathi's mother was approaching. She was coming to her daughter as a reinforcement to the watching. The servant got up and went back to the steps, and sat there as before. The queen slept on the mattress next to her daughter, saying, "It is so sultry and stuffy inside." Very soon she began to snore. But the daughter was tossing on the sea of her bed, without relief!

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Chapter 2

SALYA'S second sleeping session was very short-lived. He usually got up by early dawn. Immediately after waking up, he would go towards the eastern part of Shakala town. Four body-guards always followed him. After finishing the morning operations, he bathed in the river beyond the town's boundary, wore clean garments, and returned to the palace. Then the day i began always with the fire sacrifice performed with sincerity under the supervision of the priest, Homadatta. Salya was himself well-versed in the ritual formulae, techniques and operations. Yet he accepted the priest's authority as Brahmin and obeyed his instructions. He and this Brahmin were very close friends.

There were evenings when they would both ride long and far on horses. This particular day, after the ritual, all the three generations, himself, son, daughter-in-law, and grand-daughters, sat together to eat their meal. With old age, Salya became very fond of Saktu, a ball made of corn-flour soaked in soured milk (or curds) and then dressed with honey. He wanted this first, not only for its taste, but even more for its easy digestability. Not that the old man did not eat other things.

While they were eating, the son said, "Father, in no country do they make such delicious Karambha as we do it here in Madra."

The priest, "But I have also heard that nowhere do cows yield such fat-thick milk as ours do ".

Son, "Of course, that's the excuse always offered! But how can good Karambha be made without good quality wild wheat? The wheat we grow here has its own distinctive flavour and taste. By the way, how is it cooked?"

The cook who was serving them explained, "First the wheat should be fried in ghee, and then ground into flour. The flour should again be cooked in ghee. This is easier said than done. The most difficult operation is to bring about the right kind of viscosity."

Salya asked, "Is our Karambha superior to what they make in Hastinapura?"

The son, "Father, on every occasion you want to bring in a comparison with Hastinavati. For you, their Karambha is the best, their family the best, their sacrificial rice-flour best. Not only that, their opulence is the greatest, their kingdom the best-governed. Of course, the greatest of them all is their old fellow, Bhishma! Why is it that your thoughts run always on these lines?"

Father, "Look here, son, why do you get angry when I speak the truth? It is universally acknowledged throughout our land of Aryans that the Kurupanchalas are the best people, exemplary to all of us. All right, Homadatta, whom do you regard as the most well-versed in the sacred lore and right traditions?"

The priest, Homa who was chewing the rice-cake offered at the sacrificial ritual, gulped it quickly, releasing his tongue and jaws for speaking. Then he said, "The Kurupanchala Brahmins claim that they are the best in Vedic scholarship, ritual techniques and in purity of language."

Rukmaratha seized his advantage, saying, "That is what they claim, isn't that so?"

But the priest countered, "No, no. It is not simply what they claim. In fact, these countries have many seasoned experts in these fields. The kings there also are equally good. They can conduct any sacrificial rites and rituals all by themselves. They also patronise Vedic scholars. Take Pandu's son Dharmaraja, for example. He performed the Rajasuya sacrifice at the relatively early age of thirty-seven or thirty-eight. Why is it that other kings do not think of performing it at that age? That is why all learned persons congregate there. When they find the place congenial, they settle down there. Bhishma is himself a formidable Vedic scholar. Krishnadvaipayana, you know, donated his semen for the perpetuation of Kuru lineage. More recently he has settled down there itself. Do you think Drona, Ashwatthama and Kripa are routine scholars? So, too, are kings of Panchala. If you want to know more about these matters I can spend a whole day talking about their greatness." Then he drank the sacrificial ghee mixing it with milk and yogurt, making an appreciative noise.

The father supplemented, "Not merely men of this generation. The Kurupanchalas can boast of countless past generations of kings who had performed successfully most prestigious sacrificial rituals. Even to perform one such ritual is no child's play! Even to do one of them requires the whole wealth of Kubera, God of Wealth, himself!"

Rukmaratha kept silent. He was totally disoriented. Of course, he was sure that neither his father nor Homadatta intended to humiliate him. That was why he sat through the discussion, calm and

attentive. Horita then added, "Every day the ritual is becoming more and more difficult to perform. Now that people know the potency of the mantra, a larger number of priests are needed. Formerly, just one was enough. Now one was needed to occupy the Brahma position, a second to perform the ritual, a third as reciter, and a fourth as Adhvaryu or chief ritualist. In all, four persons are now required. Recently after the Pandavas departed for the forest, Duryodhana performed a ritual on a grand scale, employing four persons each for each of the four positions, thus raising the number of ritualists to sixteen! Further there were the disciples of these ritual specialists. In short, it is beyond the resource of ordinary folk to perform a ritual."

Rukmaratha's attention turned inwards. He knew that a ritual event meant heavy expenses, and yet he did not know that it would cost this high. Mentally he calculated the likely expenses of the Svayamvara. So many princes and rulers would come, with their retinue. All of them had to be housed and fed and looked after. Then their horses had to be fed with grain and grass. There was the cost of erecting the Svayamvara hall. Then there were gifts galore to be given away. Well, he wondered if he could undertake all this! But how did the rulers from those lands manage all this? He remembered even now how Dharmaraja performed the Rajasuya at the age of thirty-seven or thirty-eight. It was around fifteen years ago that Nakula, his own aunt's son, had arrived on a white horse, with chariots, cavalry and soldiers. Then the father showed his affectionate regard for his sister's son, Nakula, through gifts of wool blankets, grain, ten chariots, twenty horses. Nakula was all respect and fear when he saluted his father. In some places he had to wage wars and win them. Simultaneously, two of his elder, brothers and one younger brother had also gone on similar journeys of victory and war in other directions.

Suddenly he opened his mouth to say, "After all it is the wealth plundered from other places that provides the resources for a ritual performance. Isn't that so?"

Father, smiling toothlessly, "Child, even to plunder and loot, you need power and ability. Do you think you can do it?"

The son had no reply to offer. He was silently chewing the beef that had been specially cooked, presumably because he had returned after a long absence! He did not answer Homadatta's question, "Don't you think that before beef, mutton is tasteless?" For a while none spoke and silence set in. The old king began to swig a drink, containing milk and honey, noisely.

After the dinner, Salya retired to his bed. The bed-room had been cooled by the servants through sprinking water on mattresses of the aromatic Lamanca roots, covering the walls, doors, and windows.

The old man would compensate his sleeplessness during the nights with a hour or two of sleep at this time. Rukmaratha went to sleep in his own residential parts. But he couldn't sleep. He went on musing "Can I manage to organise a Svayamvara ceremony? Or should I simply, accepting father's advice, settle for the traditional bride-price system and somehow dispose of this daughter? No, that wouldn't be right. We should ourselves choose the groom, and that means only Svayamvara." He was happy to recall that the people of Trigarta had promised support. But if the war among the Kurus prevented the participation of the bulk of the rulers, then what? Wouldn't it be a failure? As his eyes began to flutter in anxiety, his wife came closer, and announced, "Hiranyavathi is menstruating, arid just a little while ago the discharge was noted."

Rukmaratha was once again deeply worried. He felt as if his entire mind was smeared with the brownish red colour of sin, and unable to bear it, he closed his eyes. In their scale of values, he knew well that if each period of fertility in a woman was left unimpregnated, it was as sinful as letting a fertile field fallow and barren. That had been the constant theme of his father's advice. Why, it was not just his father's. The Aryan moral code itself said this. This was Hiranyavathi's fifty-first lost menstruation cycle. He said to himself, "First I delayed her marriage in order to avoid the bride-price system. Then twelve menstrual cycles were wasted in the effort to arrange a Svayamvara. Now this Kuru war has posed the threat of my daughter's womb being left barren, unsowed." Gradually his eyes sank into sleep. In the darkness of the closed, sleeping eyes, the brownish red colour of the sin looked more terrifying. He recalled stories of wives of teachers who, after the menstruation cycle, sought intercourse with their husband's disciples in the accidental absence of their husbands : "Didn't they know the right moral law? Did they sin against the norm of Patibhakti, (husband-worship), disregarding the rule that the husband is their God ? Oh, God, what sin is taking place right here in my own home ", he murmured to himself. Just then his wife, who was sitting close by, asked gently, "Haven't you gone to sleep yet?"

He said, slowly opening the eye-lids, "No...."

Wife, "Let there be a son or daughter out of wedlock. How could it be wrong?"

He agreed, saying "Yes." Because he was sure that if she had persisted in asking for an answer, he had more. He knew that she would repeat the same question and thought it best to close his eyes. But she persisted, after a short interval, "You know that prior to our marriage I had borne a son, born in my natal home. You argued that you wanted that child to go with me, while you were offered only me.

If I remember, you argued, ‘if the girl was mine, so was the child born in her womb.’ You said it was your right. When I pleaded that my father was attached to the child and that I would give you ten such children, you agreed to give up your claim. Why? What has happened now? Why have you changed so much?"

"Well, "he thought, "What has happened to me?" He opened his eyes. Turning to one side, gazed at his wife’s face. Recently, he had even begun secretly to condemn her for that premarital child, so many years after marriage, after so many children! He knew it was not her fault, yet he couldn’t help feeling that way, though he had earlier loved her and demanded the child he had not fathered. Not that he had even told her this openly. She was now asking about what had happened to him with searching, staring eyes. Not in the interest of her daughter, but in order to escape the sin that would accrue to the family if a girl born in it wasted even one menstrual cycle without a seed. He didn’t answer her question. But he went on gazing at her face. She, in turn, stared back at him.

Then he shot up abruptly, pouring words, "Look, in the eastern countries of Kuru, Panchala, Kashi and others, and in the southern countries of Virata, Matsya, Chedhi, and others, they condemn children conceived out of wedlock. Some even consider them born in sin. Leave aside the views of the common folk. In royal families they regard it as a matter of shame. You remember I had gone fifteen years ago to attend the Rajasuya organised by my aunt’s sons, Pandavas. Then I made enquiries about their customs and morals. I have also heard from Brahmins visiting our court. They regard us, who still follow the old moral laws, as inferior, and look down upon us with contempt. If something they disapprove of happens to my own daughter, in my own home, how can I live in the land of the Aryans with a head, raised in honour and dignity?"

She knew that in the comity of the Aryan rulers, they from the Brahmavarta area were inferior in wealth and status. She, too, was not averse to the idea of attaining a level closer to them, if not equal to them. Yet, she asked herself, "Why should we needlessly go on tinkering with our own established moral codes? By ridiculing and rejecting ancestral laws and customs, and behaving arbitrarily, did one become superior? Should we copy others?" But she was aware that her husband had seen more countries and that he was more knowledgeable in these matters. Yet, she did not approve of his attitude and behaviour of slavishly following the ways of the Aryan land. She said, "You see, this Bhishma from the Kuru land about whom father always talks, even he is believed to have approved children born out of wedlock. Krishna Dvaipayana, revered as an expert in Vedic lore throughout the Aryan land and Brahma land is believed to be the father of both Dhritarashtra and Pandu. There you

are. Even in the Kuru family such things have happened."

He, "Yes, but that happened long ago. They have all now changed thoroughly in their ways. More recently, they have changed in most things."

She did not proceed any further. Of course, she agreed in principle that the practice of selling a girl at a price to any bidder was worth abandoning in favour of a marital mode in which the girl could choose a groom of her choice from among the assembled galaxy of Ksatriya manhood. This thought had originated with her husband. Even the ideas regarding the bearing of children out of wedlock had the same origin. May be that was why this idea was right; yet she felt that her husband was not altogether right on the question of loss of fertility time. As she sat thinking about the way in which the sin could be a toned, her eyes began to drop due to the afternoon heat. She got up and entered the inner courtyard. There she was, her menstruating daughter, bereft of waist cloth, her saree folded across her shoulders and breasts, sitting stupefied.

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Chapter

THE following day, a messenger arrived to call on king Salya. He had come, accompanied by five horse-men. It was obvious that he was a Brahmin messenger from some royal dignitary. The king welcomed him formally in the court itself. He was flanked by his eldest son, Rukmaratha, and his brothers, Vajra and Ajaya. The priest Homadatta was also present. The Brahmin bowed before the king as a messenger, but the king bowed to him as he was a Brahmin. After receiving the ritual honey offering he took his seat. Then he introduced himself, and explained the purpose of his visit. He said that, after the completion of their incognito exile in the Virata country, the son of Arjuna, third of the Pandavas, had wedded the youngest daughter of the king of Virata. They were then camping in the Upaplavya town in the north of the Virata country and had started their works. Duryodhana had categorically refused to return them their kingdom. The messenger told them that there was no need for him to elaborate on the breach of moral law involved in this. He pointed out to them that the Pandavas were Salya's sister's sons. In fact, they were planning to come personally to beseech Salya's support, but were held up by the exigencies of war preparation. They were also confident that their maternal uncle would never expect mere formal gestures from them. That was why they had sent instead, him as a messenger. On behalf of the Pandavas, he entreated Salya not only to send his soldiers on foot, cavalry, chariots and charioteers, and elephants, but to take command of the battle field and help the Pandavas to win.

Homadatta asked, "Tell me, Brahmana, where do you hail from?"

The messenger, "Kampilya."

It was the town from Drupada's South Panchala. Immediately, Salya and his sons inferred that he was from the in-laws of the Pandavas. Homadatta, impressed by the visitor's dignified language, the display of humility in words without loss of self-respect, and politeness, was lost in deep admiration for the glorious qualities of the Kurupanchala countries — their elevated diction and their noble culture.

Rukmaratha asked, "Who are the rulers lined up on your side?" The priest answered, "The Panchalas and Matsyas are the in-laws of Pandavas. Yadavas are with us. The five Kekayas, Chitrayudha, Cheki thana, Satyadhriti, Vyagradatta,Chandrasena, the great warrior Kashi king, their maternal uncle and his children, that is you folk... Well, do you need any further elaboration? All Aryavarta and Brahmavarta are on the side of the Pandavas. Well, not just on Pandavas' side, but on the side of Dharma. On the side of the merit earned through Ra jasuya. All people versed in the Vedic lore and are lovers of Dharma, all support the Pandavas. Need I tell you who are capable of grasping subtelities and nuances that even in Hastinavati, Acharya Drona, Acharya Kripa, and Bhishma himself have been known to bless the Pandavas always?"

Salya felt elated by these words. Homadatta admired the style of his speaking. Rukmaratha, too, admired it. But after a moment, he asked, "Well, does it follow that everybody else, excepting these you have mentioned now, side with Dhristarashtra? Their supporters would then include the five Trigartha brothers who were siding with Duryodhana during the cattle-raiding expedition on the Virata city, Brihadbala, the king of Koshala, Duryodhana's maternal uncle Sakuni, all the rulers in the Gandhara region, King Paurava, Jalasandha, the rulers from Bahlika, Alambusha, Bhagadatta from Pragjyotishapura, Achala, Vrishaka — not only these but also in Hastinavathi Acharyas Drona and Kripa, who may love the Pandavas but would side with Duryodhana in the war as they may not go against their master. Karna a super-warrior. His son Vrishasena is no less a warrior."

This made the emissary from the Pandavas deflated, his face sank. But he recovered immediately to say, "King, it is true that all these you have just mentioned haven't yet joined the Pandavas. But they cannot be said to have leaned clearly towards Duryodhana. Excepting Karna, Duryodhana's bonded servant, all the rest will join the Pandavas. Does the fish jump into water or into sand? Do the Aryans follow Dharma or Adharma? King Salya, though I am a Brahmin by vocation, you are my superior in learning. Please enlighten me on the Dharma of the Aryans."

Salya began to cough. Rukmaratha who was about to say something in reply withheld his words. Salya said, "If Duryodhana does not return to the Pandavas their kingdom, this Salya's arms, clubs, chariots, cavalry, elephant-soldiers, infantry will all pounce on Duryodhana! I have no more to say."

The emissary replied, "Your nephews are fortunate and blessed ones)No more is needed excepting your blessings to swing the battle in favour of Dharma."

Rukmaratha tried to say something in answer. King Salya blocked him with his right hand, now raised, and clinched the issue, saying, "I have given my word." After a pause he continued, "Priest, go and tell my nephews. I and my sons, accompanied by our army will march out from here on the day and to the place they specify."

The Brahmin brought the talk to an end at this point. He enquired about the welfare of the household of Panefava's maternal uncle. He said, "It seems you are planning to marry off your grand-daughter. Pandavas have five brave warrior sons. If your grand-daughter chooses to wed and garland the eldest of them, he should consider himself very fortunate. I myself taught him the Vedas and archery. Anyway we shall all be there at the Svayamvara of your grand-daughter." These words gladdened Rukmaratha's heart also to some extent. As the priest had to visit the other courts of Madra as an emissary, he left the very next day, departing in the cool, early hours of the morning, with his retinue.

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Chapter 24

THE priest from Panchala succeeded in persuading Salya to join the forces with the Pandavas, and the war looked certain. The exact time of its start, however, was uncertain. One more thing was also clear—it was going to be a great war. Both the sides were busy sending messengers to all the rulers in the Aryan land to entreat and enlist support in the expected war. Armies, ammunition and other resources had to be assembled, and before the rainy season broke out. The rains were expected within two or three weeks. Once they started, the streams and ponds would be inundated, rivers tearing out of mountains and rivers cutting through planes would overflow. The waters overstepping their bounds would rush towards villages and towns to island them. The Aryan people had settled mostly on the banks of rivers, and that meant that there could be no movement in the rainy season. In a soil that did not allow even walking on foot, the wheels of chariots would surely get stuck. Elephants would slip on this soil. Where could then be dry ground to encamp with the armies, and dry wood for cooking the food for the camps? Hence, it was logical to suppose that, if there was to be a war, it had to be after the rainy season. After the months of Bhadrapada and Asvayuja. Till then there could only be preparation for a war. Even that was a hazardous operation, as messengers had to go on horses, navigate in crude basket boats, or swim, and even get caught in whirlpools.

Salya ordered his army to be ready for the eventuality. The carpenters began to test the strength of the wheels of chariots by hitting them hard.They removed the weak and cavity-ridden parts of the chariots, and replaced them. They wove new ropes. The blacksmiths prepared new metal-tips for the arrows. The cobblers prepared leather shirts and protective shields. The elephant-boys trained their elephants to get used to the sounds of drums and the conch. Madra was not particularly reputed for warfare. In the recent years ithad had no experience of any serious war. Hence the army had to be given special training. Salya, past eighty, himself undertook the responsibility for making all the preparations. He would repeatedly say to himself, "Ksatriya warriors without war are rust-like metals without employment." Twice daily he would himself take charge of the reins and run the chariots. He began to polish and re-

polish his old reputation as a master of the secrets of horsemanship through strenuous application of his skill. The soldiers, scenting the war, became enthusiastic about their coming participation in it Since it was summer, they were free from agricultural commitments. Even the Vaisyas who were professional agriculturists became immersed in archery training.

The priest from Panchala had captured the heart of Rukmaratha as well. He had encouraged the idea of Svayamvara in his mind and premised that they all would participate in it, speaking both for the Panchalas and the Pandavas. He had also told Rukmaratha that the eldest son of the Pandavas whom he had himself taught the Vedas as well as the art of warfare, would be fortunate if his daughter garlanded him in the Svayamvara. Now Rukmaratha had completely committed his support to the Pandavas. Afterall, the Pandavas had earned universal fame in the land of the Aryans through their performance of the Rajastlya sacrifice. Who could be more fortunate if their eldest son took his daughter for his queen? He told all this to his wife. She agreed, and burst with pride and joy at the prospect. She told the daughter, "He is your grand-father's sister's grandson. Garland him in the Svayamvara. Then it would be your good fortune later to officiate in great ritual events like the Rajasuya and the Asvamedha and wear a ritual band round your wrist."

The daughter, "Is the boy handsome and strong? Have you seen him, father?"

Father, "Can an offspring of the Pandavas be other than handsome and strong?"

Her face blossomed.

Rukmaratha put not only his younger brothers, Vajra and Ajaya, but also his own sons through a rigorous training in warfare. As anticipated, dark clouds massed in the sky, and sweat began to pour from the body. The sweat came out of the suffocating heat. One fine night when people had fled from the heat to sleep on the terraces, parks and open courtyards, the rain came down spluttering.

All of them sat up and began chanting :

> Yō vardhana osadhīnām yō apām
> Yō visvasya jagato deva ise.

He takes forms as his desire dictates;
One a milch cow he shapes.
And again a cow that never calves.

Soon the spluttering drops turned into a massive downpour. All ran

to the park where the old king was sleeping. The family priest Homadatta also turned up with his wife. Rukmaratha, Vajra and Ajaya came with their families. Joining in the loud voice of Homadatta, they all sang the praise of the Lord of rain, Indra. Their singing pierced through the drone of the rain to reach the ears of the very clouds.

After finishing their praise and prayer, all of them — old, young, male and female — discarded their outer garments, and exposed to the first rain's coolness their shoulders, backs and chests, dotted with heat-sores. Then they repeated the sacred formula of the rain God, in varying rhythms, as they danced in the falling rain.

> Idam vacah Parjanyaya svaraje
> Hrdo astvantaram tajja jo sat
> Mayo bhuvah vrstayah su tvasme
> supippala o sadhirdeva gopah

Here is praise to Parjanya, himself shining bright
Let this reach his heart of hearts;
Let him inhale to his deep within
Let his grace shower joyous rains
And herbs of his care yield fruits plentious.

Neither the rain stopped nor did they get indoors. The old king Salya himself, rain-water dripping from head to foot, sang loudly and danced vigorously.

After the first rain, all the Vaisyas returned to their agricultural operations. But the members of the royal family, however, did not discontinue the training of Warfare. For over a week, the rains fell thrice or four times a day. As the heated earth drank the water, exuding heat, and the next rain cooled it, and the earth quenched its thirst again and again, the soil became ready for sowing. The

Vaisyas were full of joy, but all this had the effect of reducing the enthusiasm of the people for the war.

When the rain stopped and summer's sweat and heat commenced, one of the five rulers of Trigarta, Susharma, came to Sakala town. Bowing respectfully to king Salya, he accepted honey and other items of hospitality. He was a friend of his son, Rukmaratha, and was of the same age. After ordering the servants to look after the feeding of the horses and the entourage, he told his son's friend, "Rukmaratha is now at the training camp. I shall send for him. Till he arrives, take rest."

In the guest-house adjoining Rukmaratha's residence Susharma

finished his bath. While he was resting, Rukmaratha came to see him. The friends embraced each other. They got their meal there itself and ate it together. Rukmaratha said apologetically, "The food had been cooked by the time of your arrival. But they are killing a bull in your honour. Please do not think that we did not want to accord you respect befitting your status." As Susharma was chewing piece of mutton, Rukmaratha asked, "Where did you arrive here from?"

Susharma, "From my own town."

Rukmaratha, "No. It is not true. If you were to arrive from your own town, you should have reached here from the direction of Chandrabhaga river. But you came from the direction of Shatadru."

Susharma, "Oh, I see. I must compliment you on the efficiency of your espionage system."

Rukmaratha, "Well, did you go to Hastinavati?"

Susharma, "It is impossible to conceal anything from you. There can be no hiding from friends. Let us finish the meal first."

Realising that the matter was unsuited to the ears of the lovely young servant girls who were serving them, he changed the topic to the rains in Trigarta. He asked his friend about the rains there. After the meal, he offered him any one of the beautiful young servants who had waited on them, for his evening's entertainment.

Susharma, "Well, that can wait till the night. Let us now talk about serious matters."

After dismissing all the servant-maids, Rukmaratha led his friend to the soft, wide bed, spread on the wood platform. There were comfortable pillows and dice for gambling.

Susharma said, "If we start the game, I may forget the matter I have really come to discuss, particularly so when playing with you!"Then he sat on the bed, spreading his right arm over the pillow. Comfortable, he broached the subject, "Look, we are good friends. So far we have had no serious disagreements and disputes. We could never even think on such lines. Nothing, games, hunting, gambling and women, could bring about any rift in our friendship. But now fate seems to have decreed that we stand opposed to each other! However, I am sure you will agree that men must do their best before bowing ultimately to fate. Or do you?"

Rukmaratha was silent for a short while. Slowly the full implications of his friend's words dawned on him. Then taking breath some eight or ten times, he disclosed, "On behalf of the Pandavas, a Panchala priest had come to us."

Susharma, "Yes, I know. Duryodhana has full knowledge of

Pandava's activities. He keeps tabs on whom they send and where as emissaries."

Rukmaratha, "My father is particularly attracted to them as they are his sister's children, The priest asked father to organise his grand-daughter's Svayamvara, promising Pandavas' participation. He suggested that my daughter should choose the eldest son of the Pandavas, as husband, even saying flatteringly that the bridegroom would be lucky to win such a bride! Immedialtely, father pledged them his full support — his sons and his armies. He did not allow me any say in the matter. You know how he is."

For a while, silence lay between the two. Then Susharma broke it, "Then are you suggesting that we should fight each other? Would it be right?"

Rukmaratha, "No, no. Of course, not. It must be avoided at all costs. I have an idea. Father is adamant, and he will never deviate from his position. All right, let me indulge his whim, a nearly ninety year old man. Let him go with a small force. I shall cook up some excuse to avoid military involvement. I shall help my younger brothers to do the same. You, too, wriggle out of your commitment. Why should we stick our necks out for somebody else's feud?"

Susharma, "But if I keep out of a war against the Pandavas, I shall be betraying my Ksatriya ethic. You know it. It was I who had gone to the north of Virata town to steal the cattle of Virata. But the wretched Pandavas were there. But for their presence there, I could have taken all the cattle. I don't mind the loss of the cattle. But I was humiliated by them, defeated by them. Had I prior knowledge of their presence on the site, I would have gone with a larger army, and matched them. How can anyone who cannot avenge humiliation regard himself as a true Ksatriya?"

Again there was a brief interlude of silence. Then Rukmaratha asked, "Of course, you have clearly a reason to hate the Pandavas. What grievance do I have to hate them? Mind you, that, too, when my father claims such close kinship with them as his sister's children?"

Susharma, "Well, what better reason than that your close friend hates them?"

This put Rukmaratha in a tight corner. Leave alone expressing his disagreement openly, he could not formulate it in his own mind. They were of the same age, peers. Additionally he was a friend fired by the ambition to enhance his status and stature in terms of social, religious and cultural practices within the Aryan world. Further the friend had assured support in the matter of his daughter's Svayamvara. How could the enemy of such a friend not be his enemy too? Suddenly a fierce rage against his father seized him. He was sore

with the old man for intervening in such a serious matter, after having entrusted him with the task of ruling, as a crowned king. But he did not have the courage to stand up against the old man. While he was thinking on these lines, Susharma spoke, "You may wonder why we, Madra and Trigarta, should get entangled in the affairs of others, and why we should not keep aloof. But there are rumours that Kekayas are joining the Pandavas. The Gandharas are firmly with Duryodhana. This looks like a conflict in which the whole Aryan land will be engulfed, everyone forced to take sides. In such a war, wouldn't others dub us as cowards if we refused to take sides? When there is a fierce war raging there, how can one with the Ksatriya blood keep away, indulging in women, Soma drink, and the game of dice...?"

Rukmaratha interrupted him, "Whom do you reckon likely to come out victorious in this war?"

Susharma, "Without question, Duryodhana ". He then added, after a while, slowly to let the argument sink, "You want to know why and how. Reason one — the Pandavas are dog-tired, totally exhausted after thirteen long years of exile in the forest and strange lands. Two, Duryodhana is bound to attract to his side an overwhelmingly larger number of rulers because he is in power and he commands a royal treasury. He can spend any amount of money over the army. Maybe people may bow symbolically to the Pandavas for having spent years in the forest in good fellowship, for visiting holy places and for growing uneven beards. But who will support them with material resources? None, I am sure."

Rukmaratha persisted, "But were not the Pandavas the mighty rulers who performed successfully the great Rajasuya ritual?"

Susharma, "But political strength does not rest on memories of bygone glory. What counts is the current control of resources, current powers. In the last thirteen years, Duryodhana has consolidated his power systematically to the extent of almost wiping out the very name of the Pandavas in political terms. Even forgotten in Indraprastha territory which they themselves had built! Out of outward obligation to the Panchala, a few here and there may join them. No more than that. Why should you catch the tail of a losing bull? If you are fool enough to do this, then the winning, power-packed bull will rush at you and gore you to death. Don't you see? Your father is a fool, and he is afflicted with dotage."

They talked far info the evening. Then the rain began to rap the earth. They stayed indoors. Then Rukmaratha called his brothers to conference. Susharma attempted to brainwash them into Kaurava support. The banquet consisting of beef as the main dish was getting ready for the night. After the banquet, sitting on the specially-made

bed, Susharma addressed Rukmaratha, "You told that that astute priest from Panchala advised you to offer your daughter in marriage to the eldest son of the Pandavas. You know your daughter will have five husbands! What is this, the law of the civilised Aryans or the law of the barbarian hill tribes? You would find yourself excommunicated from the Aryan society."

Rukmaratha, "How do you mean?"

Susharma, "Didn't all the five Pandavas marry Draupadi? They wouldn't know who exactly was the father of which child. Even Draupadi also wouldn't know. All that they know is the name of the eldest son. Suppose they were to say, it is our custom to share a wife, and demand it from your daughter. What can your daughter do then? And what can you also do about it?"

This aspect of the situation had not occurred to Rukmaratha. Now that he had to confront its reality, he became totally and hopelessly confused. He was now convinced that his father was acting from the infirmity of old age. Unable to answer the friend, he fell silent. At the end of his third yawn, Susharma himself broke the silence, "Of course, I am as anxious as you that your daughter should be the queen of a large kingdom. I shall persuade Duryodhana's eldest son to go to the Svayamvara. Let the war be over first."

Rukmaratha stood up. Suggesting to his friend that he should go to bed, he came out of the room. The first thing he saw was a group of ten servantmaids, their bodies pasted with sandal and their hair decked with flowers of many hues. They were all very young. The one at the centre of the group was carrying a vessel full of liquor brewed from rice. He had forgotten about this item of hospitality. He went back to his friend and said, "Get up and see. There are ten girls to entertain you. You can pick up as many of them as you want or any one you want. But beware. Our Madra girls are tough and can drain off the strength of any man! After all, you are now fifty, aren't you?"

The friends sat together, quaffing the drinks brought by the girls. After a while, Rukmaratha left for his residence. One beautiful girl entwined his arms with hers, and supported him right up to his queen's bed. Then she returned to her place.

Outside, the rain was pouring. The queen, now drunken, was groggy and sleepy. She was not even aware of her husband having slept by her side. Rukmaratha was kept awake by the drinks he had consumed. His mind was still on the talk he had with Susharma. He mused to himself — "Draupadi also had the same plight. No doubt Arjuna won her in the Svayamvara. Later the elder brother, Dharmaraja, told off Drupada, Draupadi's father, saying, 'After

winning the girl, we have every right to share her the way we wish. What right have you now to interfere in our personal affair?' Should the same fate befall our Hiranyavati?" He shivered with fear. He felt that the Pandavas who had flouted the Aryan moral norm would not get any support and help. He made up his mind to back out of the promise made to his father to support the Pandavas. He felt grateful to his friend Susharma. He tossed restlessly on the bed, but sleep refused to favour him. Father was foolish. He must be made to see sense. Then he felt a sudden urge to talk to somebody. He shook by the shoulders his wife who was sighing deeply. She merely grunted and resumed her deep sighs. After rolling four or five times, she woke up. Then he explained to her the new thinking, and concluded, "See, we had not given sufficient thought to the matter. If we had given Hiranyavati in marriage to a Pandava, this would have happened. What a catastrophe!"

She began to doze off again. He said, "Look, I have been talking about very serious matters, and you are sleeping. Speak." She was silent. He shook her shoulders, woke her up, repeated the matter, and forced her to talk.

She mumbled, 'Well, if she has the strength to take on five males, let her marry the Pandava." He asked, "What was that?" By that time she had slumped to sleep.

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Chapter 5

THE very next day Susharma departed from the capital of Madra. Rukmaratha went up to the river with his entourage to give a ceremonial send-off to his friend. Soon after, he hurried to his father's palace. Salya was in the garden, his silver-white hair shining in the declining evening light, watching the freshly breaking bud of the Sampige flower. He asked his son, "Did you arrange for the send off?" Before leaving, Susharma had respectfully taken leave of the old man. Rukmaratha went straight to the heart of the matter. He asked the old man whether the fate of their Hiranyavati would not be the same as that of Draupadi, the fate of being saddled with five husbands. He asked the father whether this was not a violation of the Dharma of the Aryans.

The old king, too, found this improper. He also knew that this new idea was planted in his son's mind by that prince from Trigarta. He was aware that the two young friends were trying to characterise all past as wrong and to establish new practices. He told the son what occurred to him at the moment, "If that were a violation of the Aryan code, would Bhishma have approved of it? Who knows better than Bhishma the moral and religious laws of the Aryans?"

For the moment, this silenced the son. He had second thoughts, and he reflected, "Yes, Bhishma and Drona have accepted this. Not only that. All the Aryan rulers and princes as well as priests had attended the Rajasuya conducted by the Pandavas. No, if they do not like it, they need not offer their girl to the Pandavas. But how can they say that they were wrong?" The father asked him, "Did your good friend teach you these worthless things?" Rukmaratha was angry at the accusation hurled at his friend, true, but the question was, what was right? When all the Kurupanchalas had universally accepted the situation, only his friend had raised doubts and objections, with his sophistry. He was also bothered by another question, "Is there any other case of such a marriage arrangement among the Aryans?" When he put this question to his father, the old man had no ready answer. Since he was not keen on continuing the talk, Rukmaratha left for his residence. While sleepy, his wife had mumbled something incoherently. Now he wanted to discuss the matter with her in

greater detail.

Salya was well-versed in Aryan ways and codes. He, too, had no knowledge of any instance other than that of the Pandavas of brothers wedding a common wife. But if it were immoral or irreligious, how could Bhishma and others accept it? How could princes, kings, scholars and priests from all over the land of the Aryans attend the Pandavas' Rajasuya ceremony? Therefore, he was uncertain about the religious and moral propriety of the Pandava marriage. He consoled himself by saying, "So what?" Then, accompanied by his body-guards, he went to the yard where they were practising the use of arms and weapons. The starting of the rainy season had reduced the enthusiasm for warfare training. Salya had himself not visited the training camp for quite some time. He saw the wheels of the chariot get stuck in the slushy earth. The horses did not run with the customary freedom. In all, just around fifty Ksatriya youth were there practising archery. Some twenty of them were practising spear-throwing. As soon as they saw the old king, they stopped talking among themselves and showed greater concentration in practice. Their sweating bodies gleamed as if they had been oiled. The training was going on under the overall supervision of Salaka, a person whom Salya had begot through a servant-maid.

He moved close to Salya and asked, "Father, when are we actually going to war?"

Salya, "I do not yet know, child. They will send us the information at the right time. I am sure."

Salaka, "I asked this question because there is confusion among these youth. They are asking whether the war will take place at all or when it will take place. They complain that they are getting bored stiff with practising the manoeuvres again and again to no purpose."

Salya, "Don't you know that, war or no war, the practice must continue?"

Salaka, "But their question is why there should be so much of practice."

The king did not reply. Anyway there could be no war till the end of the rainy season. They knew it well. Silently he rode his chariot himself. He drove very fast in the plain. Then he abruptly stopped, turning back. They were new horses, and the ground was slushy. Yet he could manage the animals. He said to himself, with obvious pride, "After all, I am Salya ". He brought the chariot to rest on one side. While doing this, he said to himself, "Well, we know about sisters marrying one husband, but we have never heard of brothers wedding a single wife/' For a while he sat still in the chariot. It was

evening, and there were signs of the imminent rain. He rode back to the palace. His nostrils were assailed by the smell of ghee being poured into the sacrificial fire. He took a bath and then joined the ritual. After the ritual he broached his problem with the priest, "Would any practice become religiously and morally legitimate if all the Vedic scholars of Panchala and Hastinavati approved?"

After he received the reply, the king found no further need for questioning.

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Chapter

6

THERE was an exchange of sharp words between the father and the son. The sum and substance of father's argument was that Bhishma and others had accepted the practice. But the son countered by saying that Duryodhana and others from Hastinavati, the Trigartas and all other kings supporting Duryodhana were ridiculing the Pandavas for this marriage. He said that only among some primitive tribes in the forests brothers shared a wife. The Pandavas who had spent their early years in the forest and in the company of tribal people had destroyed themoral code of the Aryans, he averred. He bluntly asserted that there was no question of his giving his daughter to the Pandavas, and hence the issue of supporting them in war at the cost of incurring the hostility of a wealthy and powerful ruler like Duryodhana did not arise at all. After the end of the rains, when communication became possible, Rukmaratha's spies brought news that the war was an absolute certainty. It was reported that Bhishma and Drona would fight on Duryodhana's side, and so were most rulers of the Aryan land. The one notable exception was Krishna of the Yadava clan. But even Krishna's elder brother, Balarama, was proceeding from Dwaraka to go to Duryodhana's support. The son asked Salya, "Father, you repeat ten times a day that none is better versed in the knowledge of Dharma than Bhishma. If he supports Duryodhana, then it is clear on whose side Dharma rests. Don't you see?"

Father, "But we have already given our word to the Pandavas."

The son understood that his father was in a genuine dilemma. Vajra and Ajaya worked out a compromise position. They said, "The Pandavas did not consult us when they gambled. They are now declaring war without consulting us. Let us not support any side. Let us remain neutral." At that point it appeared to Rukmaratha to be the most sensible thing. Salya agreed and a heavy weight was lifted off the minds of all concerned.

Rukmaratha sent the message to every village that men need not assemble for training and practice in archery. As a result, people felt relieved and happy. That season they expected a good crop. They

became absorbed in such agricultural operations as removing the weeds, installing fences, and taking care of cattle. Rukmaratha himself devoted a lot of his time to administrative obligations. Vajra and Ajaya, who had been earlier entrusted with the task of training the army, now felt relieved. They could now indulge in rice brewed liquor. They had at their disposal beautiful servant-maids, experts in pleasure-giving, to regale them. But within a few days they found their pleasure pall. As against the delights of the bed-room, they found more invigorating the joys of listening to the vibrating bow-string, shooting arrows from a running chariot, hunting wild beasts on elephant back in forests. One day the two brothers decided to go back to military training, and took out their chariots. But when they reached the training camp, they found it totally deserted. Not even Ksatriyas could be found. Enraged, they sent for the soldiers to assemble. The soldiers, respectfully folding their palms, pleaded, "If there is not going to be a war, all training and practice, however prolonged, will be a waste. We can better employ ourselves in hunting or other activities."

The brothers saw sense in this position. Collecting the elephants and equipped with bows, arrows, spears, swords, and traps, they rushed into the forests. The rain-fed forests had become rich with green vegetation. They could also spot deer and hare, and other meat-yielding animals. They also bagged two cheetahs and one tiger. Everybody had a thrilling experience. The following day they went to the next forest, and the day after the next until they exhausted all the forests of Madra. For at least a month now there would be nothing to hunt. They didn't know what to do. The soldiers went back to toddy-swilling and women. So did Vajra and Ajaya. Once again they peached the stage of satiation and ennui. It soon dawned on them that women were fine as relief from serious work, but if women became a central preoccupation it became a boredom. Well, what else was there as an alternative? Back to hunting. They knew that beasts had fled to foreign forests, and they had to return disappointed.

Ajaya told Vajra, "Brother, how nice it would have been if we, too, could engage in agriculture as relief from warfare."

Vajra, "But if we took to agriculture, how can we call ourselves warriors? Our routine is fixed — warfare training, warring, and physical pleasure."

Ajaya, "If there is a war on, it is all right. If not, we feel like scratching our flesh, out of desperation, out of sheer boredom."

Vajra, "Therefore, the only solution is to make a war happen. If not, we shall be condemned to misery. There is one more thing. If there are no frequent wars, the king will have no reason to feed us and fete

us. Would he? He might downgrade us and drive us to agriculture. But if we handle earth, then not only will we dishonour ourselves, but the entire Ksatriya community will be disgraced."

Ajaya fell silent. He was full of agreement with his brother's views. In grave silence, the two brothers began to think hard, to think of ways of breaking the impasse. As if he had discovered a new way out, Vajra said, lowering his voice, 'In a limited quantity, we can defeat women, but in excess they can overpower us. For a hero, it is a better fate to die fighting in a battle than be humiliated by helplessness in handling women!"

Ajaya, fractionally flexing his neck, "That is what the soldiers too are saying."

Rukmaratha was gnawed by no such worries. The act of governing kept him fully occupied and busy. When there was no work, he could switch over to hunting. Or he would play dice with a neighbouring ruler. His mind ran towards women seldom. Moreover he was fifty almost. In spite of the decision unanimously arrived at by father and sons to remain neutral, Rukmaratha was not totally uninvolved. Being a ruler he found it necessary to collect secret information about different countries. One after another, the spies brought news. Some of them who had left during summer had remained outside during the rains. They were now returning one by one. Some had come from Hastinavati. Some had returned from Upaplavya where Pandavas were concentrating their war preparations. Some were returning from distant Kashi. The news they brought was that some countries were on one side and the others on the other side, but nobody professed neutrality. The information was that many non-Aryan groups were preparing to involve in the war, and these included the Kiratas, Raksasas and the Nagas. Bhima had earlier slain Raksasas like Baka and Hidimba, and the Rirksasas were just waiting to take revenge on the Pandavas for all this. They had pledged support to Duryodhana. The Pandavas had earned the hostility of the Nagas tribe when the Pandavas, settling in Khandavaprastha which Dhritarashtra had given them, had not hesitated to denude the Nagas forests and cleared it for cultivation. In his anger Arjuna had set fire to the forest even in summer. Many Nagas had perished and some had fled. Taking advantage of this, Duryodhana had told these Nagas as well as the Nagas in Trigarta, to wreak vengeance on the Pandavas now. They had all organised their own special force and gone to Duryodhana's aid. It was said that Hidimba's sister had borne a son named Ghatotkacha to Bhima. Pandavas had sent Bhima himself to enlist his support. Though Bhima had lived with her for just a year, Hidimba's love for Bhima had not diminished. Gathering his Raksasa followers, Ghatotkacha had joined the Pandavas. The Pandava strategy was to set up

Ghatotkacha against the other Raksasa supporters of Duryodhana.

As bits of information flowed in, Rukmaratha's picture of the gathering storm became larger and more complicated. He had to provide the linkages between the bits by exercising his imagination. One thing was clear. ms was going to be the greatest wars of them all. How many soldiers! How many chariots! How many horses! What dexterity! What strategic formations! There, close by, a great war was being fought, a war in which virtually the entire Aryan world was involved, and several non-Aryans. How could he remain neutral, crouching behind barred doors? Suppose, in old age as he narrated the story of the great war to his great grand-children and they asked him why he did not participate in it, what reply could he give? But he had given word to his father that he wouldn't participate. A battle-field was no place for mere spectators. His enthusiasm was dampened by such thoughts.

One day when he was engaged deeply in administrative work, the chief of carpenters, Nandaka, approached him and said, "To make them ready for the war, the chariots have to be more tightly rigged up. We have to make two hundred new chariots. Some five hundred ordinary carts need to be produced for transporting provisions and other items. I had summoned carpenters from every village to carry out these tasks. I was told by the minister that there is now no question of war and therefore there is no point in all this preparation. The carpenters now complain that they had come here giving up a whole year's local work. They demand, work or no work, their wages must be paid."

Rukmaratha thought there was no question of refusing them the wages. Having paid the wages, if they got the vehicles made now, they might rust unused. If they were given their rations and two blankets per head as wages, the farmers would have to be taxed extra to meet the new expenditure. He told the carpenter chief that he would give a decision the next day. The same afternoon, the iron-smith came with the same problem. The work of making the metal arrow-heads, swords, and so on had already commenced. He wanted to know how much of this weaponry was wanted, and whether he should enlist the support of extra smithy workers. Rukmaratha told him also that a decision would be given the next day.

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Chapter 7

THE earth had yielded a golden harvest. The paddy plants had flowered. The other food plants had also flowered. The smell of the tender corn made one draw one's breath deep with desire. The sharp heat of the sun pumped strength into the grain. Followed by four bodyguards, king Salya rode out of the town on horse back. He sat stretching his limbs on the grass in a field, and went back in memory to his own boyhood and the perfume of the growing green things he had loved so much as a boy. As if hungry for it, he went on breathing that scented air. He wondered, "How many years had gone by like this!"There was a kind of attraction here, and also a kind of repulsion. As he enjoyed this green perfume, he felt it was worth living as long as possible. But memory of the years so far lived came in the wake of the desire for the years unlived and wished for. The smell of the green, blossoming fields recalled scenes of stagnant, still waters. Why? He did not know. Yes, he had to concede that zest had gone out of living. Everything looked like a purposeless, stagnant, motionless water — everything, the palace, the spicy and delicious food, the servant-maids attending on him twenty four hours, children and grand-children. Yes, it was all as still and as lifeless as stagnant water. How many more years had he to live? He speculated. Bhishma was reputed to be one hundred and twenty. May be he too could live that long. But Bhishma was a life-long bachelor. What was the life-span of a bachelor? It seemed Bhishma did not remain a bachelor in order to live longer. Yes, he, too, could live as many years. But what was he to do in all these years given to him? Now there was no longer any need to involve himself in the responsibility for administration. The inclination had also gone. Drinks were no longer compelling. As for women, the basic ingredients needed to attract them and be attracted by them, had vanished long ago. Somewhat recently, a little enthusiasm for war had been kindled. Now that too had died with the decision to be neutral. The grain-buds were getting ready to split by the sharp heat of the sun. The aroma was filling his active nostrils. The irony of it was not lost on him. After all he was a warrior, a Ksatriya, and what had he to do with the scent of growing grain, instead of sword, chariot and bow? The thought prompted him to relax further, and he lay on the grass, his face against the

prevailing sun. He began to think — Bhishma was said to be the commander-in-chief of Duryodhana's forces. He was a hero among heroes, the incomparable. What wide chest! How could I at my age undertake leadership of a battle? Bhishma could have said and opted for a life of penance in the forest, but why didn't he? It was a family equally known-for penance and spiritual achievements. Salya closed his eyes, and saw the world turn blackish red. When he opened the eyelids a little, the rainbow rays, in seven colours, pierced him like arrows in a war. He shot up suddenly and approached the horse waiting near the road. The waiting bodyguards held the horse so that he could get on its back. The old king rode away from the town with great speed. His white horse left the horses of the body-guards well behind, as he displayed exemplary horsemanship, holding the reins steadily, without wobbling, without any visible effort. The body-guards, trailing behind, could see over the dust ahead and not the horse. The ride stimulated the king, putting some enthusiasm in him. As he rode fast, the horse as well as the rider became soaked in sweat. His boredom had at last, disappeared.

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Chapter

8

MEANWHILE Rukmaratha was wondering whether gambling would relieve his boredom. It wasn't altogether satisfying to play only with his brothers Vajra and Ajaya. It mattered little whether he won from his own brothers or lost to them. There was no thrill in it. Hunting in his own forests also did not enthuse him any longer. He was carrying on the task of governance for the last ten years, and prior to that he was working with his father as an understudy and an assistant. Even that work no longer excited him. It would be exciting to gamble with neighbouring kings and princes. As the rolling dice came to a halt, one would hold one's breath to see what was one's fate. But, none of them was free to gamble, Everyone was busy with war preparations. They all talked of nothing but the ensuing war. None of them now had the slightest interest in gambling. All the rulers and princes related to each other as friends or enemies, depending on whether they supported Pandavas or Duryodhana. Rukmaratha realised that a Ksatriya could not escape the fate of being a friend or enemy.

Temporarily he had avoided being Susharma's enemy. But he knew that the earlier intensity and warmth of friendship was lacking between the two. In desperation he toyed with the idea of even taking the side of the Pandavas.

One fine morning, Maharaja Duryodhana's own brother Dussasana arrived. Halting outside the gates of the Madra capital, he sent the message of his arrival through a special messenger. Rukmaratha sent his brother Vajra to go in his chariot and accord the visiting dignitary the ceremonial welcome due to him. Dussasana came and touched the feet of Salya, calling him uncle. After taking the old man's blessings, saying that he had little time, he presented his case, "Uncle, it is true that Pandavas are your maternal nephews. But so are we. Tell me, what happiness was there for your sister after marrying into the Pandava family? We had nothing to do with her death. I can assure you we were not responsible for her exile in forest. Of course, it is quite another matter if you wished your nephews to regain their kingdom. Even if we were to return it to them they will not avoid the fate of horse-washing! When it has been their fate of the junior wife's

children to clean up horse dung, why should you go to Pandava's assistance? I can guarantee that if we win the war, we shall definitely give that kingdom to your sister's two sons. You can take my word on this to be as good as Duryodhana's own sworn promise. Our quarrel is with the first three. We have no hostility with the peace-loving and well-behaved younger two, your sister's children."

The total friendship that King Salya had for all the five Pandavas was now split. Dussasana told Rukmaratha, "War means money. The soldiers must be provided with clothes, food, weapons and other facilities. Or else why should they be ready to sacrifice their lives? I have brought with me one thousand blankets, one thousand pairs of covering sheets, and a potful of gold coins. Not as reward for your soldiers. But as a tribute due to an elder in the family, our uncle Salya. From the moment you set out to join us in the war to the moment you return to your land after the war, it shall be our exclusive responsibility to provide your army with shelter, sumptuous food, and fodder for elephants and horses accompanying it. Let us have right away your estimate of the quantities of milk, ghee, flour, and rice approximately needed for your army. We shall supply you with twice the quantity you estimate. Let me remind you that the hands of the cooks of Hastinavati are as generous as the hands of their kings."

Salya remained silent, self-absorbed. But Dussasana divined the mind of Rukmaratha by merely watching his face. He himself added, "One more thing. Do not think that this war is inevitable. The Pandavas threatened us because of Krishna's advice. They went on claiming that they had this support and that. We took up the challenge and told them that we too had a whole lot of supporters. I believe they will assemble with their supporters. We and our friends shall also assemble at one place to demonstrate our strength. Then I am sure they will see reason and agree to a peaceful settlement. Our occupationof the throne is not so important as that Dharma, the moral law, should win. If the supreme moral law, Dharma, is defeated, how can it promote the real welfare of the people? Duryodhana rules his kingdom for the welfare of his people. If you have any doubts, you can visit Hastinavati and see for yourself if this is true."

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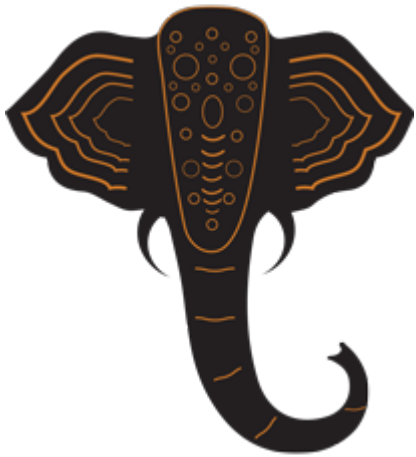
PART TWO



Chapter 9

TO the east of the town, on the river-bank, squatted Vidura's house. The front-door faced the rising sun, and in front of the door spread a wide yard built of stone and mortar. Thirty steps below lay the great river Ganga. Kunti was in the habit of sitting by the running water. Whether out of her love for water or simply to negotiate boredom, she was squatting under the shade of a tree in that afternoon sun. Both her feet were in the water where fish were playing. The fish nibbled at her clean feet. When the fish did not stir and the water lay still like a mirror, she could see her image very clearly. It was the image of a tall and wide body. The face riddled with wrinkles. White hair. She was tired of gazing at it again and again. She said to herself — "Krishna has gone to prevent war and conclude peace. Sometimes I wonder why he has come on this impossible mission. God knows what exactly were the words bandied about in the peace parleys." Her thinking was interrupted by Vidura's arrival. He had accompanied Krishna on his mission of peace. Kunti looked in his direction. He came closer, and made sure that nobody was around and that they were alone. Then he sat down, removed the court garb, and let his chest and shoulders cool in the open air.

She asked, "Where is Krishna?"

Vidura, "Duryodhana attempted to imprison Krishna by tying him up with ropes. He accused Krishna of trying to persuade his supporters in his own town to give up their allegiance to him. Because Krishna's body-guards were alert and anticipated the move, he could escape. I told Krishna that it was no longer safe for him to stay. He left immediately. I believe that he has told you to do something. Well, he asked in a hurry to remind you of what he had suggested to you yesterday night."

"Yes "she said and asked the dazed Vidura, "What really happened there?"

Vidura, "Duryodhana attempted to tie up Krishna himself. What else is there to say?"

Kunti, "They knew in advance what would be the result. Why did

they send a messenger of peace? Wasn't it an illusion?"

Vidura, "Another astonishing thing Duryodhana spoke. Bhishma was aghast at it. But I had the impression that Dhritarashtra himself was quite pleased within, though he wouldn't show it. He declared that none of the Pandavas was born to their father. He said that he would not even call them Pandavas. He told the elders that they had unjustly forced him to give them a share, and he had restored justice by winning back that share in the game of dice. He asserted that they had no claims because they did not strictly belong to the lineage."

Kunti, "He did not say that Kunti was a prostitute, did he?"

Vidura, "No, that was not what he meant. His argument was simply that children born of Niyoga were not legitimate. He used words that cut at the very roots of our ancient tradition. I could see that he had the backing of his brothers and Karna and Sakuni in taking this position."

Kunti, "Yes, this was all just to avoid parting with the kingdom..."

Vidura, "Yes, yes, they were all words of Adharma..."

Kunti did not speak. She focussed her eyes on the water which had covered her feet. She watched dumbly her sharp reflection, her tall and broad body. That was why they had named her Pritha, which meant the large one. She who was now white-haired, with a face all wrinkles. Vidura said in a lowered voice, "Please do not agonise. I have simply passed on to you what he had actually uttered." He added, "Today he used throughout the expression, sons of Kunti, and not even once referred to Pandavas." She thought to herself — "Yes, the sons of this white-haired, wrinkle-faced woman, no they do not belong to the Kaurava lineage. These puppies do not know the strength of her mind." In the stirred water her image got fractured, as the fish played below. How many fish were there? One, two, no, four.

Raising her head, she said gently, "Vidura, go and eat your meal. It is already late." The sun came down from the apex of the sky, and bent low enough to be filtered by the leaves of the trees on the west. Vidura said, "You, too, get up and join me."

Vidura's wife, Parasavi, was waiting for them. Vidura's children, grand-children and great grand-children, had already finished their meal. The cook served the three. The rice was cooked soft and fluffy, easy to handle for the teethless. The more viscous porridge was easy to gulp. After the meal, Kunti did not sleep. She descended the steps to reach the river-bank. She sat on a stone slab. She recalled Duryodhana's words, "Kunti's sons." She felt angry, no, she merely remembered her anger. She asked, they would become child ren of

the daughter-in-law who bore them, how could they be children of the man who impregnated her? Duryodhana's father was blind. Prior to marriage, the blind man did not know what a woman was. After his wife became pregnant, he started enjoying the servant-maids. Or else Duryodhana too would have been merely the son of Gandhari. Wasn't his father a son of Ambika. She felt anger rush. But she restrained herself, reluctant to curse the ancestors of the Kuru clan to which she was linked as a daughter-in-law. That would be violating the ancient moral code. In order to perpetuate the lineage, they picked daughters-in-law as if they were young cows or buffaloes bought in the fair. Just as they used my mother-in-law to reproduce my husband and this fellow, Duryodhana's father, they employed me to get these my children. Now they had the cheek to say, they were not Pandavas! And that blind old man was inwardly happy at the accusation hurled at her! She felt like spitting on their faces. It was the holy mendicants who named her eldest son, Dharma. She cursed the immoral, wicked Duryodhana to die an early death, as he had dared to question the wisdom of the sages who did penance in the Himalayas at the foot of the Badarika hermitage. She said to herself, "My eldest son had never departed from the path of Dharma, the moral law." So had her other sons. Thus she consoled herself by saying that Dharma would always win in the end. Her troubled mind became somewhat becalmed. She began to doze on the stone slab. She suddenly realised that for the last thirteen and a half years, this stone slab had been her bed. Then she slid into a sleep and into memories. What names studded the record of this Kuru family! Dushyanta, Bharata, Hastina, Ajamila, Mahabhauma, Dilipa, running back to a hundred generations! Now, Bhishma. Was Pandu himself any less illustrious? The scene in her memory and reverie dissolved to a distant day in the past, her past. Father told her, "Daughter, Pritha, he is sitting there, in the grave lotus position, the youth with budding beard and moustache, his skin white and bright. He has already at this young age subdued the surrounding kingdoms, the bravest hero, go and put your garland round his neck." Mother supported father, "His brother is blind. Therefore he will be the one to occupy the throne. You will have the distinction of being the queen of a ruler who will perform the Rajasuya or Asvamedha ceremonies. You will be the chief queen, his first wife." Her friend also pushed her in the same direction, "Pritha, his body answers to your height and size. A male should be like a hungry lion, ready to rush and crush a woman's body. I see none else with a body matching yours. Oh, he — the very first night he will squeeze your body dry." She winked her left eye mischievously as she said this. What about herself? She had said to herself, "What body build! And so young! I am told he is of my own age, eighteen or nineteen." She recalled the scene. As she went round the assembly, all eyes were hungrily devouring her, the eyes popping out of all sorts of faces, faces with irregular beards, fully-

grown bushy beards, beards with streaks of white, blue beards, shining brownish red beards. What a bunch of rulers they were,how many and how different! As she passed them one by one, she agreed with her friends's assessment. Yes, she was right. Pandu's was the body of a lion, crouching tense and ready to pounce. His muscles bulged as he bent again and again in a heavy ritual bow. Frequent exercise with heavy bows had made his arms strong and muscular. She did not think any further. Her mind was made up. She talked to herself, to her own past, "My big arms went forward almost automatically. With pride, he met my eyes squarely, and raised his face, but lowered his head for me to put the garland o f victory round his neck." He had won her, Pritha. She now asked herself, "Why hadn't some other prince or king stood up and challenged him? Why not?"

What splendour, what pomp, what display of wealth in her marriage! Her father did not hesitate to spend lavishly because he was overpowered with joy that his daughter was going to be the first queen in the prestigious Kuru family. She had been a special favourite with her father. After all, she had been adopted after being wanted most intensely in a family without daughters. How many cartloads of valuable gifts had gone to fill the Kuru palace! She reminisced, "Father had sent with me as companions, ten beautiful servant-girls for the consumption of this male lion. I guessed that very first night, but did not fully understand. His powerful chest and arms crushed me. It was a middle-aged chest filled with sweaty hair. It was no soft, pliable flesh of a sage and mendicant. He had raved, 'Kunti,you have a lovely face. Your eye-brows are enchanting. Your large chest is beautiful.' All words, only words meant to compensate for what could not and did not happen. Yes, what her friend had hinted and what I had intensely wanted, did not come to pass. Soon he had gone to sleep like a defeated bull. He said that he had been exhausted by the long journey, was sleepy. Then he had turned a thought-filled face a way from me and slumped. I couldn't read the reality. I was relieved that the moment when a virgin must feel a sense of shame had been postponed. He slept. Or did he? Maybe he had simply closed his eyes wide awake. How could I sleep? I was full of desire, shame and hope, the hope of being a chief queen.

"In the morning, when the friend asked me pointedly about the night's experience, why didn't I tell the truth? As she asked me, did he do this, do that, what did you do in return? I went on saying yes, yes, my head bent. Wasn't it because I myself did not understand the situation? The friend had asked me, pushing me with her hand, Tell me, you are not giving the truth. Is it because you want to protect your husband's honour?' I gave her a vivid and imaginary account, piecing bits from memory." Kunti recalled, "True, destiny had cheated me, but I, too, had cheated myself by keeping my mouth shut

about the truth. Once begun, the false and purely imaginary account was passed on to others, embellished with more lies in the process. Not once. How many times? Had I told the truth to my friend, may be she would have told mother, and mother would have passed it on to father. Pandu's honour would have been openly sullied and I might have married again." She recalled, "What specimen of a male for outward appearance!"

"Bhishma was in a great hurry. When the daughter-in-law menstruated for the first time after her joining their household, the news of it put him to agony, the agony that the Kuru seed would not sprout. When he heard of the second menstruation, he raved and ranted. When the third menstruation began, he put all the blame on the daughter-in-law, claiming that his son had not sowed in a fertile field." Kunti now asked herself, "Why, in spite of all this, did I not speak out? Guarding the truth even from my close companion, I would exaggerate my husband's sexual prowess. All these servant-girls who had accompanied me as gift to husband's home told me that he had not pinched even once their tempting arms. Ironically this was interpreted in his favour, as they said he had no time for anyone else excepting the luscious flesh of his wife. At least that was the understanding of my female companion."

Vidura, "Surely, Dhritarashtra is deceiving himself."

Suddenly Kunti woke up from her reveries to the world outside. Vidura sat closer. She, too, sat down. He told her, "If you feel tired, go and sleep." She replied, "No I was just lying down."

Vidura, "Well, apparently consoling himself with the thought that the five Pandavas were not of the family, but merely children of Kunti and Madri, the blind did not see that he is himself the son of only Ambe."

She bent down, scooped water and drank it. And said, "I should ask Bhima to shoot two arrows into those eyes of his so that they may at least open."

Vidura added, "That is what it will end up in, eventually." A servant approached at this point, climbing down the steps. He told them that the grandfather had sent for him. Vidura went along with him, climbing up the steps.

Kunti washed her sweating face with a handful of water, and then dried her face with the end of her whi te saree. She told herself, "Knowing the truth, Dhritarashtra is deceiving himself." She remembered that she also was a life-long victim of self- deception. She asked, "What did I get out of life excepting cruel persecution, stark misery? When was I happy? When most wives enjoyed their husbands in the first years of marriage, my lot was to suffer

husband's cruelty. At least he could have left me alone. No. He would pounce on me, trying to show his maleness. He would abuse my body, saying, Kunti do this, do that, move this way, move that way, bend this way and bend that way. At the end of such unnatural exercises, he would pant with exhaustion, like a bull that cannot mount. Humiliated by demonstrated impotence, he would cook up some excuse to get angry with me, abuse me and assault me, shouting that I was unfit to be his wife." She was now asking herself, recalling the vanished years, What was I to do? My sex was excited by his acts but its urge left unfulfilled, suffer the pangs of frustrated body or bum to cinders in the flames of his unjustified accusations? I dreaded the coming of night, the night of relentless violence to my flesh and spirit. Dumbly I would wish that this impotent fellow would sleep elsewhere. Even at this point, why didn't I tell the truth to my friend?'

"One day I became defiant, and answered him, 'Great son of Aryans, you keep on harping that I am not a worthy wife for you. What do you think you can find in any other woman that you do not find in me? If you had the power, the power to satisfy a woman, I would have been worthy of you.'

'This had enraged him beyond bounds. He did not hesitate to slap hard and viciously my cheek, and shouted, 'Is it you from whose mouth come the words that I have no power? I have not left any palace servant-girl untouched. Now for one year I have been living under an abstinence vow. If you are interested, I can tell you that at least one hundred servant-girls were my bed- companions.'

She remembered. She had cried that whole night, No, not because he had enjoyed one hundred other girls. No, because he was boasting with false claims and beat her. From that day on, his anger against her knew no limits. Every day he made it a practice to sleep with her and then without reason or rhyme abuse her. He would also abuse most violently her adopted father Bhoja and her actual father Surasena. She said to herself, "Thank God, right now I am free from his persecution." Gradually she got reconciled, and tried to obtain the needed information from him. He opened his mouth but to boast. She understood. At fifteen he had tried to handle servant girls. One after another they had tried to win the love of tie prince by employing on him aggressively all their skills in love-making. They had flattered him by exaggerating his sexual prowess and then made him work hard. He was exhausted, and in three year, he had lost all sexual potentiality. Soon he became totally impotent. Well, she had at last told her friend, "What can I do with this male bereft of all semen?" But by then she had spent two years in her husband's home.

The friend had said, "Chief queen, the prince is said to invite the

servant-girls from our land to different places. With them, too, he displays his impotence. They too feel the same contempt as for an enemy who does a lot of sabre-rattling without giving any fight. I was under the impression that at least there was real fight with the chief queen."

She had replied, "Dear friend, all these days I was feeding you with lies, utter lies, lies based on self-deception." Then overcome by sorrow she had embraced her friend.

Friend, "Why did you deceive yourself? Why didn't you tell me the truth earlier?"

Kunti, "Well, I do not know. Perhaps I derived some kind of perverted pleasure from attributing to my husband a non-existent sexual potence. Moreover he was a ruler of the celebrated Kuru clan."

The friend had answered, "You see, these Kuru rulers are all the same. All sexually impotent males. All males with bygone prowess in this matter. It is far better to be wives of ascetics wedded to the vow of sexual abstinence than be the wives of the scions of the Kuru lineage. Do you know their reputation in bed?"

Kunti did not say, "Yes ". Now she remembered those words as true. Of course she knew it. Old Kunti's train of thought came to an abrupt halt. Her attention shifted to the image reflected in the running water. All these things from a dead past were coming back alive. 'This sort of thing was not happening for the first time. Yet they had never returned to her in memory with such vividness and in such rich detail as now. Why were they all returning now? She asked. It was as if the past was narrating itself to some invisible listener who was saying, yes, yes. But really who was there to listen to all this? After the death of her close friend, none was there who could be that close. After all, Kunti thought, there could be only one true friendship in one's life. The friend had lived only tor three years after the conversation she had recalled. She had accompanied Kunti to the Himalayas, but the severe cold in that region had killed her. Who was there for her now into whose ears she could pour such confidential matter? When Draupadi had come as a daughter-in-law, Kunti could use her as a confidante in the early years, at least to a limited extent. But Draupadi, too, was a victim of tribulations. Twelve years of exile in the forest. One whole year of servitude in a stranger’s household." Yet it was not my kind of misery and misfortune, "Kunti reflected, "She had not one, but five husbands, and each one of them with the semen-power to satisfy not one, four wives. All that a woman really wants is a husband who can quench the basic thirst of her flesh. If that is there, a woman would accept the worst plight in other respects."

She recalled another rumour that had cropped up at that time. The old father-in-law Bhishma, equipped with an army, twenty cartloads of gifts of clothes, utensils, blankets and jewelry, had journeyed to the Madra region. The reason for this expedition? Kuntibhoja's daughter had failed to supply the sons who could perpetuate the lineage, and hence he wanted to get a wife for his son whose fertility could match his son's potentiality. Kunti remembered, "I wanted to laugh, but I was scared to, frankly." She knew that it was beyond his capacity to produce children out of any woman. But if the new wife were to capture his heart with cunning, then it would spell disaster for her, a life worse than hell. Her friend had endorsed her thinking. The Ksatriya could acquire as many wives and as many concubines as he wanted. Who could say, no, to him? Recently he had ceased even to see her, avoiding her company. She recalled, "I had myself gone to him to ask, Why are you doing this?"

Her husband, "Uncle is the head of the household. How can I tell him not to do what he wants to do?"

Kunti, "You just tell him, that there is no need to get a new wife, that it is not I who have failed ".

Husband, "Then are you suggesting that the fault is mine? I had conquered a hundred concubines." He dilated his pupils.

She had returned to her chamber, silent and contemptuous.

"Bhishma had planned to perpetuate the Kuru lineage by taking Madri as the new daughter-in-law. She was slimmer and two years younger than I. She lacked my generous build. Her shape and form were very attractive. Dainty and petite she was. Eye$_S$ sharp. Everybody in the palace praised her beauty with superlatives. I was just there till the marriage ritual was completed. Then returned to my palace. I was the chief queen and she was my inferior. I felt it was her duty to call on me first Otherwise she could be aloof. He too didn't come to me. He lived in the new small palace built for her. A month after the marriage, Madri menstruated, and that gave me relief. I, of course, was menstruating with regularity, as regularly as the course of the moon. After post-menstruation bath, she came to my palace. She was very clever in speech. She called me, Elder sister . She said, 'Sister, your parents had sent gifts loaded in a row of carts in your marriage. You were selected at a Svayarnvara ceremony. I am no equal to you. Among my people, the practice is to give bride-price and buy a girl. The marriage is not celebrated in the bride's residence. That is the custom there. Now I am at your mercy. Please have compassion on me and protect me. I said to myself, Where is the question of compassion?' I could not resist asking her, 'Is it true that you menstruated?'

Madri, ‘What else could I do? The same way you menstruated,' she stared frankly at me.

"I saw that she had understood the situation within a month, and had not deceived herself like me.

"That cleared the air for our friendship, and all enmity melted away. There was no ground for jealousy there. She told me everything about herself — her town, kingdom, her birth and upbringing. She also enquired about my parents. She said, ‘Sister, we should meet and chat frequently. Or else where can we look to for support?’ A day after this, he arrived at my palace. He came with a face smirking with a sense of triumph. I asked him, After all these days, did you at last remember Kunti?’ He said, ridiculing me, ‘She is more of a woman than you. I cannot imagine how you could have been born a woman.’

"I was ready with my reply. I said, ‘She too has menstruated, I believe.’ I wondered, was he, too, in his anxiety to accuse me, victim of self-deception? Till then I had some pity for him. Now I had nothing but contempt. I felt repulsed by his very sight. His shoulder was criss-crossed with marks of cuts made by the bow-string. The lines had become knotted into black marks against the full muscles. It was a shoulder bulging with muscles. I stared into his eyes. I had not realised till then that my eyes had such force. It was that day that I knew that a truthful person can force a liar to show himself in his true colours by the sheer force of staring. His eyes were filled with envy. Then envy was replaced by anger, anger natural for a defeated person against his victor. I did not take my eyes off even fractionally. Then his eyes lost their strength and began to quiver. I pursued him relentlessly with words, No, not her. Even if you took four more wives, you will be incapable of preventing the flow of menstrual blood. Whenever that blood drops to the ground, your sins across births accumulate. And it is further sin to hide the truth and lie to the senior wife.’ That did it. His eyes fell. They seemed to search some hiding space beneath the earth. The face began to sweat, as small droplets dotted his forehead. The thin upper garment soaked with sweat clung to the neck, but I did not rise to wipe away the sweat. I sat before him motionless, my spinal chord taut. He had no more words to say. The whole room became solidified, motionless, lifeless. The sun’s heat pouring through the windows, the perfume pervading the room, the soft couch on which both of us were sitting, all became solid metal. Then he stood up. His steps were heavy as he walked out, I felt elation, a sense of triumph.

"The next afternoon the news came. That very morning Pandu had set out on an expedition of world conquest with chariots, army and cavalry. They said he had gone out to conquer surrounding

kingdoms, drive out forest folk, expand the territory of the Kurus, to give joy to the Kuru ancestors in heaven, in the true style of a brave Ksatriya warrior. The people in the town were overjoyed. They thought that the fame and glory of their town would be enhanced. The boundaries of their land would expand. Bhishma had repeatedly passed his hand gently over his head, embraced him again and again and blessed him profusely. The ministers, the servants proclaiming the glory of the lineage, the heralds, had surrounded them. The priests had chanted the mantras, their voice reaching the sky, praying for the increase in prowess and fame of the king. Some observers had complained that the queens of the prince did not join the farewell scene. It was interpreted by some as due to reluctance of the young wives to be separated from him. Others accused the queens, especially me, Kunti, for behaving in an un-ksatriya style.

"The expedition lasted for six lunar months. One forest came under our control an^ its inhabitants fled, scared. Another neighbouring king conceded defeat, giving up his claim to authority over the territory on our side of the river. The chariots, horses and jewelry he had offered as tribute, arrived in Hastinavati. They were welcomed by the residents of the town. In another place a hill tribe was defeated and it sent a hundred blankets as tribute to the victor. The name and fame of the Kurus had spread far and wide in the Aryan land. But king Pandu was still abroad on his mission of conquest. He never visited the town even once during this time. After all, he was not farther away than half-a-day's journey on horse. Yet he never came. Ten beautiful servant-girls followed his chariot. The defeated rulers were swelling his female entourage by offering three or four women apiece to the victorious Pandu. It was asked, 'What need did the prince have for his wives, while he had such female company?' The pride with which the residents talked about him was described to me by a friend who got the news from the servant-girls in the palace. Up in the north, beyond the Gangadvara in the Himalayas, he had defeated a Gandharva, and acquired from him as victory tribute five beautiful females, expert in singing, dancing and body decoration. He had also sent ten carpets made of red wool, and richly embroidered.

"Madri used to visit me every day. Our constant topic of discussion was our common misfortune. She did most of the talking and I was usually a mere listener. When she heard that the prince had won five hill beauties as part of the tribute of the vanquished to the victor, she was frightened. I consoled her, 'Why are you afraid? Of what use is even the most beautiful girl to him?'

Madri, 'No, what I meant is this. These Gandharva girls know great secrets in sexual art. They have the reputation of turning even the most reluctant male into a tense bow ready to shoot!'

Kunti, ‘Suppose the bow has no strength. How can tuning it help?’

Madri, ‘Sister, you do not know. In our region they can tune any bow.’

Kunti, ‘Then why didn’t you tune it yourself all these days?’

Madri, 'Well, I did as much as I could, as far as my knowledge went. It certainly used to make the king happy and excited. But it yielded no fruit.’

Kunti, curious, ‘What did you do?’

"Madri, blushing and hesitant, began to describe the ways in which she worked on Pandu’s maleness. These were methods and techniques I could not have even imagined, let alone known. When I recounted them to my friend, she, too, was astonished.

Kunti, Madri, how did you know all this?’

Madri, ‘In our country, elder women instruct younger ones in these arts and skills. Why, didn’t anyone in your parental home teach you about such things?’ She made this sound very natural.

"I then began to curse myself repeatedly for my ignorance. I even became jealous of Madri. Suppose one day or other she succeeded in curing her husband’s impotence, and benefited from it. It would spell the end of my status as the chief queen, if she first bore him a son. Tactfully I ferreted the secret out of her. She told me all that she knew. That was how our new relationship as teacher and the student began. We met in utter solitude. As a teacher she would describe to me the techniques and tricks, and I would learn using my imagination. Which woman wedded to an impotent husband would not feel oppressed? After imbibing the knowledge imparted by Madri, I myself became sexually excited all the time. Soon T almost forgot the picture of the prince, and began to remember that holy mendicant who had roused and satisfied my sex urge before marriage, and, in imagination, began to use the methods of Madri on him. I wished passionately that, at least, he should pass my way again. This desire was burning me.

"Six months later, the prince returned from his expedition. The whole town took on a festive appearance. House-fronts were coated with stripes of red mud, streets were watered to avoid dust, and everywhere doors and gates were decked with green leaves. Elephants and horses, too, were beautifully decorated. Old man Bhishma himself went to the town’s main gate to receive his son in pomp and ceremony. Reluctantly I was attracted to the celebrations. I stood on the balcony to watch the proceedings. So did Madri. First came the procession of carts loaded with the gifts of the war, and the beautiful damsels won as war trophy were on display in decorated

chariots. At last he came, the prince. He looked emaciated. He had a worried look on his face.

"Two days after his triumphant return he visited my palace. The whole of the preceding day I was full of dreams. The dreams of a doctor ready to use new drugs and techniques. He came nearer and sat before me. His face was haughty, and the undergrowth of lies I had earlier destroyed seemed to have grown afresh. I felt repelled. Unable to meet my eyes, his eyes were wandering. I sat still and silent. At last he spoke, 'Kunti, it has been six months since I set out on the expedition.'

"I felt further repelled. I didn't say a word. Again he spoke, 'Did you hear, Kunti, I said six months - six months of conquest.'

'Well, six times I menstruated.' The words forced themselves out of me."

Turning his neck, he looked in my direction. Raising his right hand, he slapped my cheek with vicious force, making my cheek swell with the heat of its impact. They were strong, well-grown Ksatriya fingers. I was silent. I did not weep. I did not say a thing in anger. Not even a tear was there in my eyes."

Kunti woke up from her past, saw her image in the water before. Sixty years had rolled by. How could one remember everything that had happened? She relapsed into self-reflection — "Yes, this much I remember clearly, sharply. I met his angry stare with steady and concentrated return-stare. This was like pouring ghee into the fire of his wrath. That look of his began to emit smoke. Then it became kindled, began to burn. Then it burnt itself out into cinder. Cinder dropping to ground. His forehead showed drops of sweat. All around his neck the sweat, soaking it. I felt ashamed. 'Lord, you are feeling hot,' I said and wiped gently the sweat on his neck, chest and back, with my saree. He broke into loud sobbing. Saying, 'Kunti', he clasped my hand. He came closer to me, nuzzled his face against the breasts, and wept like a child. No words came out of him. I became angry with myself. I held him tight. My body was big enough to match his, my broad chest, high shoulders, huge frame. I could fully clasp his warrior's body, not Madri, with her slender frame. Perhaps no other woman had my kind of frame. Embracing him passionately I warmed .him. I warmed myself, too. Pushing his head between my ample breasts, sighed wordlessly, and sobbed. Hot tears flowed from his eyes. I too started crying. His round, hair-covered head, his chest and shoulders were riddled with wounds he had won in the expedition. Wounds caused by arrows, had dried up. Not all, though, some still festering.

"Till evening he was with me, uttering not a single word. For one

month he did not return. I sent for him, with no result. I learnt that he had not visited Madri, too. After his return from the expedition he had not gone to her even once. I was told that he was living all by himself in a hut across the river Ganga." Kunti raised her head and looked in the direction of the bank beyond. Yes, she could recognise the spot even now after so many years, but the river had now widened to engulf that spot. ‘The victorious prince had chosen to live alone in a hut, leaving behind his two wives and several concubines. There he lived, immersed in the study of the Vedas, in the company of priests. But here in the palace my menstruation cycles were turning with regularity. I had then neither anger nor contempt for him. Now he was no longer cheating me. He was not cheating himself either. I wondered whether I had become really his wife at last. Why did he all of a sudden decide to live in a hut? Why did he, in the first place, decide to go on a victory expedition, world-conquest, all of a sudden? Why now he was on a different kind of expedition, one to conquer his soul? These Ksatriyas are everywhere the same. Always indulging in excesses, always directionless, always self-confounded.

"Suddenly one day he came to me on his own. It was the time when the sun had just declined. I had completed my menstruation period two or three days earlier. He came inside. Came close, and sat. Then he took my big hand in his hand. Now the face was devoid of all arrogance, and the repulsive undergrowth of lies was no more there. Nor was there any attempt to avoid my eyes and their stare. He looked at me straight, met my eyes steadily and calmly, and said in a firm, decisive voice, ‘Kunti, I do not want kingdom. I do not want the title of a king. I have decided to spend the rest of my days in the Himalayas, doing penance. I am not very old, just twenty-four. The same as you. Somehow I have the premonition that I may not live much longer. I want your permission to carry out-my new decision to renounce the world, for a married man to do so without his wife’s consent is against the law, against the Dharma’.

"My entire frame - its breadth, its height and size - appeared to collapse and get sucked into earth. I felt bad that I had shattered my husband’s sense of self-confidence and self-respect to this extent. Yes, yes, I took both his hands in mine, and, in humility, said, ‘Forgive this wife of yours now’.

He said, self-critical and self-aware, ‘No, you did no wrong. I have considered the whole matter thoroughly in all its aspects’.

I replied, ‘Suppose you give up the idea of penance. Then what’?

He, ‘What is it that I can do, being here, when I cannot fertilise and every month you menstruate, unblocked by seeds’?

"What could I say? But the fear of committing sin engulfed me, too.

I kept silent."

He, ‘You were the one married in a Svayamvara, one who came approved and approving. The first wife is religiously the real wife. Moreover you brought to us heaps of gifts. Your permission is crucial.’

"I was pleased." The pleasure came out of jealousy for Madri.

"The prince promised to see me the next day and departed. He went straight to the hut, crossing the river, this very river."

"I was overpowered by a desire for him, and found it impossible to live without him. It looked impossible a month after the wall of deception and self-deception between us had been smashed. I found it impossible now to be separated from him after we had at last become one, finding each other in our true selves. Why not follow the husband to his life of penance? What could I do here any way? Would not some fraction of the sin of allowing menstruation he had to bear, stick to me, too? He had made up his mind to wash away that sin through rigorous penance. What could I do here watching month by month my menstruation blood flow unstopped, unfertilised? May be, I, too, could do some penance, though I had little idea of what it was all about. One thing was certain — the fear of sin had gripped me. Instead of returning to my parental home or remaining here without him, the picture of accompanying him to his penance appeared compelling. Next day when he came to see me, I broached the matter. He said, ‘Look, Kunti, you are a princess’, and then he tried to scare me with an account of the hazards and hardships involved in a life of penance. They appeared to me to be the usual routine words husbands dole out to their wives. My firm decision gave him satisfaction, I could see it reflected on his face. I was not sure whether his efforts to dissuade me from going with him were a mere formality or whether he thought that, if he immediately agreed, it would reflect ill on his male pride. This thought made me angry.

"Madri followed suit. I tried to dissuade her, saying, ‘You are a tender young girl. The hermit’s life is not for you’.

Her reply was, ‘What do I do staying here? How can I live alone here?’, ‘Look, sister, you who had brought so many gifts are leaving. What will people say if I who was bought through bride-price remain behind’? she asked me boldly. I felt sorry for her, and I embraced her, my right hand coiling round her. Her head bent, she cried. Here was a slender body, delicate frame. She had a face so tender it could make defeat look like victory. The black colour that filled the crevices between her lashes and shone in droplets, made her look even more ravishing. I embraced her again, deriving warmth. She pleaded, ‘Sister, the prince is totally in your control. He would do nothing

without your approval, it seems. Please ask him to take me, too. Rather you take me with you'.

I queried, 'How do you know this?'

Madri, 'Am I so blind I cannot see it?'

"The person who felt most sad at Pandu's departure for penance, was Bhishma. It was a natural feeling. A ruler who had just returned from a successful mission of conquest and who could further extend the territory of the kingdom and take the fame and name of the Kuru lineage to dizzy heights, was just quitting, leaving the burden of ruling to his old uncle. But the old man was helpless. The son had stuck to his decision like a rock. The two had an exchange of arguments. The son had said, T am not leaving for ever. There seasoned sages abound, and so medicinal herbs. There are also experts in medicine, who know great secrets about curing ills. I shall return fathering sons. Till then carry on the burden of ruling, please'. Bhishma had to accept the son's decision. I remember that at this time, king Pandu's blind brother, Duryodhana's father, Dhritarashtra, came to his younger brother and said, his blind eyes pouring tears, What would happen to the kingdom, if you go like this? What would befall me? The entire responsibility of the Kuru lineage now rests on you. Since you are determined to go, I shall not stop you. But I beseech you to return soon'. I believe the elder brother was just ten or fifteen days older.

"I had very little contact with grandmother and mothers-in-law. Grandma Satyavathi lived all by herself in an exclusive residence, and never met anyone. She and her meditation, nothing else mattered to her. It was even difficult to say whether it was meditation or penance. I believe she was originally from a fisherman's family. Now she behaved more Ksatriya-hke than a Ksatriya, turning all her attention to matters spiritual and other-worldly. My mother-in-law, Ambalike, and Dhritarashtras's mother, Ambike, also lived a similar life; they followed in the foot steps of their mother-in-law. They lived close to her, served her. They withdrew totally from household activities. They spoke seldom or very little to their daughters-in-law. They lived a life of total retirement. The son's departure for penance had no effect on them, did not make them personally unhappy. Their only regret was that the kingdom was left kingless. Further the wives, too, had departed. Yet they felt somewhat mollified that healers and medicinal herbs would be found where they went to help their son.

"As we got ready to leave, the whole town was in sorrow. A young, prince of just twenty-four years, a conqueror, one who had enhanced the fame and glory of the town, was leaving. The towns-men took pride in the prowess and victory of their prince. The fear that

someone from outside might invade their town and thus destroy their pride, haunted them. They all followed the prince and his wives right up to the bank of the river, and entreated that he should return soon to engage in a larger mission of world conquest. They waited in farewell till the three crossed over to the other bank of the river.

"It was during our Himalayan sojourn that I and Pandu felt the genuine bond of matrimony We had assumed that it was a stage in which the couple gave up their sexual relationship and jointly strove to attain spiritual and other-worldly merit. We slept together on a mattress woven out of grass and unrolled on wood planks neatly arranged. The dream of the life to come, the next life, rose before us. But Madri slept alone in a separate mattress in a separate hut. Though both of us were deprived of physical satisfaction from the husband, I, at least, as the one won in a Svayamvara and one who was chief queen, had the satisfaction of his physical proximity I had practically' forgotten the husband's sexual impotence. How can one hold this deficiency against a husband who had surrendered everything to me as if he were a child? Yes, it was this very deficiency which had driven us to this plight. I was here in total command, the sole mistress. Madri had recognised this. She never whispered a word of defiance, never disobeyed my instructions. I too did not exercise any open and visible authority over her. In a way, it was quite a happy life. From time to time, Bhishma used to send donkeys overloaded with provisions — rice, wheat, jaggery, oilseeds, ghee, blankets, sarees and dhoties. He despatched servants, fewer than usually employed in the palace, to cook and serve, and an expert priest to keep the ritual fire burning.

"Gangadvara was about four days' journey away from the capital town of Hastinavati. I walked apace with my husband, never getting tired; but Madri felt exhausted. I told her that she should go to a horse. She must have felt bad and ashamed that when we two walked she was on horse-back. Pandu added, 'Do as Kunti suggests'. Not only should the length of the legs and the speed should be the same but also the style of walking. My body-frame was equal to my husband's. Holding my hand as we walked, the prince said, 'Kunti, it is the Aryan custom to take wives from their fathers' land. I shall hereafter call you by your parental name, Pritha. I feel proud when I look at the build of your body'. I blushed. I started walking with my body bent. Even long before we reached Gangadvara we could see the blue outline of the great mountains. It was a stunning sight, making me dumb. It was no mere green forests ta which I had been accustomed both in my own country and in my husband's, that felted those mountains. It was a blue that paralleled the sky's blue, rose high to merge with it. I asked, 'Is that it?'

He, 'Well, yes, this is the beginning. We have to cross it and then a

couple of more ranges of peaks. After fifteen days of ascent and descent through the mountains, we shall reach the start of the land of the Devas.'

"My enthusiasm rose, an enthusiasm to penetrate and live in a new world. I felt like shouting in elation. An enthusiasm arising from total liberation from memories of childhood and all the burdens of husband's home. Enthusiasm for a new beginning. I thought this was the real kingdom of happiness. Why? I couldn't explain. The friend who would come up to me, now and then, used to say, 'Pritha, do you know what bliss shines in your face'? I did not need her to say it. I felt it as I watched the surrounding blue, climbing up and down, winding round the mountainous terrain. I felt like piercing the sky with the stick that supported me so that it would pour greater joy on me. This state of mind remained for two or three days. Then the mind sagged. The enthusiasm abated. Every step negotiated with the help of the bamboo staff increased the heaviness of the heart. It was certainly not body's exhaustion. I couldn't figure out the why and what of the matter. That's the way of the; mountains. For no reason, they swell the sea of your joy one moment, and the next moment drown you in a sea of sorrow. Why and what? None knows for sure.

"We reached our destination thirteen or fourteen days later, if I remember right. The advance party of servants had already built a hermitage. It was on a spot bounded by a mountain to the south and an even higher mountain to the north. Between them the undulating, green hilly terrain. Amidst the rising and falling landscape was a small area of level land cleared for our habitation. Everywhere there were cardamom plants, strong scent of flowers. All over spread thick the Davana scented-leaves, intoxicating the viewer by simulating his memory. Their aroma coiled the belly of the mountains. What rich variety of flowers'. King Pandu announced, 'This is where we shall be'.

I said, 'Maharaja, the place is so beautiful that it makes one mad with joy. Also there were flowers and Davana plants all along our way. Why did you choose this spot, after nineteen days of journey from the town, full of sweat, acute pain in the limbs and other muscles, shortening breath'?

He, 'Pritha, unravel the mystery by yourself', and he was really tired. The words came out with difficulty as he rested heavily on the walking staff.

I thought hard. But, I couldn't figure out the truth. At last I said, 'You tell me'. We had a commodious hut, with a slending roof that let the rain-water fall out without leaking through: Walls inside were covered with dried grass that could keep the winter cold out. Back to it was another hut, slightly smaller. Next to it was a ritual chamber

and even a casual glance would make this obvious. Near by was kitchen. Then followed the hut for the servants. Immediately behind was the horse-stable. All the structures were not built on the same level. They were scattered on uneven terrain. Between them were stone-steps.

He reminded me, ‘You did not answer my question.’

I, ‘What was that?’

He ‘I asked you to find out why I had picked on this particular spot.’

I, ‘Of course, I had forgotten the question I myself had asked. This place is like that, making one forgetful. Yes, why did you choose it?’

He said, pointing with his raised staff, "You see the mountain over there. Well, that is the boundary from where begins the land of the Devas. Above and beyond is all their territory."

I, interrupting him, ‘What does it mean?’

He, ‘Kurus, Yadavas, Madras, we use such labels to distinguish different people. Similarly, the people called Deva live there, and their territory begins from that mountain. It is said they were the original ancestors of the Aryans. Their king is even now called Indra. Their priest is called Brihaspathi. They bear the names we employ in our ritual formulae such as Agni, Vayu and so on. Their kingdom is organised even now the same way. The people down below in the Aryan land are not as well versed in medicinal herbs and skills. They are reputed to know the secret of nectar itself, the potion of immortality. They know of herbs which can rejuvenate and restore the lost youth. That is the place where you can get all these things. But they do not grow rice, wheat and other grains we have. These are rarities for them. Their mouths water when they see these grains. If lean give them some in exchange for their medicinal herbs, my illness may get cured and I may produce children../ His voice trailed away.

"I was aghast, the ground beneath my feet appearing to dissolve. When he said that he was going to do penance, I had felt some sort of mental satisfaction. For me, who had given up husband, marital life, and progeny, and had only one goal in life, that of expiating for the sin of wasting the menstrual flow, there was only one overriding purpose — penance. In fact, it was he himself who had planted this idea in me. Now he was turning my mind towards forgotten desires. I was not prepared for this. I said, ‘No, no, no, we shall abandon such things/

He, "Why, aren’t you keen to become a mother?’

I, bluntly, ‘No’.

He asked, ‘Shouldn’t the Kuru lineage grow and continue? How can you, come into this family as a daughter-in-law, say such things?’ How could I speak more openly and make him see my point? We had to choose that way or this way, with the forlorn hope that some mountain people would give effective medicinal herbs. If we went back to where we had left, then there would be repetition of the same agony, anxiety and frustration. As my contempt for him turned into anger, I asked, Why once again this infliction of cruelty?’ But if I were to tell him about all this bluntly, he would be hurt. I was sure that this person, carrying on the burden of perpetuating the Kuru lineage, would weep in sorrow till his tears soaked my chest, i must train myself to be desireless. Shouldn’t snip off the bud of his hope, I decided. It was easy to decide, but how could one come as a daughter-in-law to the Kuru family, and live without such desirelessness? Those five do not belong to the Kuru lineage, I refuse to recognise them as Pandavas and I shall only call them Kunti’s children/ so Duryodhana had declared. What did he know? I smashed my mind, suppressed my desires and without allowing Pandu’s hope to dry, I had discharged my responsibility as a daughter-in-law of the Kuru family!"Tightening her lips, Kunti looked at herself in the reflection. T have lived all these days as a daughter-in-law of this family. Why cannot a daughter-in-law’s children be son’s children? Adharma can win verbally. But it cannot win a war." She said to herself, "Kunti will not be defeated." Her eyes in the reflection below in the water were clear and still, and they were looking back at her with deep concentration. The sunlight filtered through the branches of trees, fell on her image in the water, splintering it. Raising her head, she turned back. The sun had come down from his noon day height. At the time when the sun came down to disappear and reappeared the next day, Krishna asked her to go and not delay. He would arrive alone long before sunrise. Right here in this running water, a little further down, would bathe, pray to the rising sun with joined palms, and then meditate with closed eyes. He said, ‘Go alone. I have already explained everything to him. You just stand close to him. Tell him, ‘Child, Karna, Pandavas are your own brothers, never forget that. That is all, I have nothing more to ask.’ She slowly turned her neck. The image stayed in the water. But her legs, thighs, stomach and chest were trembling." Why did this son of the daughter-in-law of the Kurus not become a Kaurava?" She asked herself. She heard a voice say from somewhere "Kunti, you must acknowledge defeat before the son born to you." The image began to vibrate vigorously. She closed her eyes, and gained some self-control. She thought." If the first-born son of the senior daughter-in-law of the Kuru lineage had been a Kaurava, Kunti would not have found herself in this plight. Yes, that was the way of the mountains,

they revived old sorrows without reason. At first I couldn't see why and how. Later the sorrows came clear and sharp, floating. The memory haunted me while gazing the high mountain that marked the beginning of the Deva-land, while getting into the running waters of the rivulet for bath, while string! ng the flowers into a garland. The same memory that sprouted, matured and concealed itself even before I was aware of it! Now I am loaded with awareness, understanding! But there is no sprouting. To endure penury one must kill all desires. My heart was telling me now — better be a ripe sage than a sour Ksatriya. How can one wipe out the memory of the person who first unriddled the secret? That, too, when one was forced to live with a life-partner who had no power to penetrate into the secret? That secret had to be experienced to be understood. Understanding without actual experiencing, was like the boastfulness of an impotent male. Right from my earliest years, I had been consumed with curiosity about this supreme secret of my flesh. Questions that worried me were, How is life produced? From whence comes that living doll, crying, laughing, moving its limbs, ejaculating? When very young, I had asked my own mother. She had just smiled. When I asked my father, his eyes were cast in the direction of the servant-girl standing nearby. I never asked anyone else. Even after entering the household of my adopted father I used to chatter away. Whenever I learnt of a baby born in any household, I would hurry there with enthusiasm, crazy about it, just to see what it was all about. What is being born? Where is the baby, prior to birth, where does it come from? How does it emerge out of woman's belly? I gradually pieced together answers but couldn't believe them. The key question was who puts it in a woman's belly? I was ashamed to ask others such questions but this did not kill my curiosity. When the great sage Durvasa came to visit my adopted father, my father was happy that there was a daughter around to attend to the needs of the sage. The sage had asked, 'King, how old is she?' Father said, 'Fifteen'. The sage commented, 'What growth! You are a fortunate man. She will be the mother of brave heroes.' Father was happy. I was overjoyed! I was happy at the thought of becoming a mother, a mother of bra ve sons, sons who would come out of me ejaculating, moving their limbs. Father had commanded, 'Child, when a great sage arrives, it is the duty of the daughter of the house to look after his comforts and needs. See that he is not dissatisfied on any account.' He was a bit short-tempered. But otherwise, a good sage. I thought, suppose he combs his hair and dons a crown, how nice he would look! I served him most sincerely, and our relationship turned more friendly, more informal. I was fired with curiosity to put to him my old questions. One day I asked him, 'Sage, tell me how a baby is produced.' He stared back at me, as if he couldn't believe that I had asked the question. He kept silent. But I stood there, waiting. He asked me, 'Why do you want to know the answer?'

I, ‘You said I would be the mother of great heroes. Now I want to know how I can become one.’

He, ‘That would occur when it occurs. Why worry now?’

I didn’t speak but stood firm there as if insistent on a reply. He, ‘Are you so keen on a child?’

I, ‘Yes’.

He didn’t say anything more- But I stood there rooted to the spot." Kunti remembered with a sigh. The vibrating image stood still. Yet it was very subtly, fractionally shifting, staring at her. Her question was innocuous, with no deeper inclinations." The sage said,‘Come hither’. He made me sit close. I moved closer. Quietly, unquestioningly. His bare chest was bristling with hair. The face tapered into a fine beard. Stretching his right hand, he took hold of my right hand. He said, ‘Come hither. Come closer, still closer.’ As I sat very close to him, he asked, ‘You have an intense desire for a child, right?’ He looked into my face. Then he pulled me close to his body, clasping me tight. What happened to me? No excitement, certainly. Only shame, and a curiosity transcending shame. Yes, a kind of joy. He whispered lovingly, Pritha, Pritha.’ Then he looked into my face, and smiled gently.

"The following day, he himself called me to him. I had little understanding of it all. Yet I was longing for that experience. The whole of the preceding night I had not had a wink of sleep. He kissed me, saying, ‘Pritha, Pritha.’ His beard was soft. The same routine the next day, the day after next, and for several days. It happened every day. I knew he would call me nearer, and in anticipation I would be close to him. I was keeping count of my menstruation days. A day or so prior to the expected menstruation period, I was sitting before him. But suddenly I ran off to retch, and returned. He asked me to sit very close to him. Then he smiled, gently passed a hand over my head, and announced, Now you will have your own child’.

I asked, ‘How?’

He replied, ‘Gradually you will know. All in time/ When father had come to participate in the ritual fire ceremony, the sage himself informed father, ‘Kunti Bhoja, you will have a grandson. Out of wedlock." First, father’s face registered happiness. Soon followed sadness. Two days later the great sage departed. Before going away, he blessed me, saying, ‘Pritha, I should have left a fortnight earlier. But I thought I should leave only after fulfilling your intense desire. If you deliver a male child, he will be a celebrated warrior. If you deliver a female child, she will be lovely, lovely like you.’ Having said this in father’s presence, he left after receiving all the royal courtesies due to his status.

"I was still gnawed by curiosity. I asked one of mother's friends when she was alone, about it. She explained the whole thing to me. After learning from me in detail what had transpired between me and the sage, she said that the juice he had planted in me would grow into a child. It would grow in nine months, it would come out of me, a baby with eyes, nose and the rest. It would be coming out of the same passage through which the sage had poured his semen. I was getting to know the truth of this. But how it all happened remained as yet a secret. I felt a sort of enthusiasm. A sort of inexplicable urge to run around, climb a tree and swing from its branches, and to play with a swing of rope hanging from the branch of a tree. I would do all this in the company of my friends and play-mates. Meanwhile I had bouts of vomiting and discomfort. I kept count of the days. One month. Two, three, four. I realised that my mother's friend had spoken the truth. I could feel something growing bigger every day, in my belly. I was astonished, and elated. In the presence of mother, one day father told me, 'Pritha, child, now do not stir out of the interior of the palace. You will soon be an unmarried mother. If we don't hide it, the very honour of our royal family would be sullied.'

I asked, 'Why so? Why?'

'Why should our honour be lost? Why?' The image in the water also sighed deeply. That is the way of the mountains- They resurrect old sorrows, re-open old wounds. Memory begins to harass us. They had arranged it all pat, to their satisfaction. I was told, 'Child, do not be sad. The sages are old-fashioned and outdated in their ideas and practices, Ksatriyas in our parts are more advanced in these matters. For the Ksatriyas it is a disgrace for a girl to bear children out of wedlock. They would even refuse to marry such a girl. We desire that you should wed a proper prince of equal status to ours.' With such words they consoled me, pacified me. I was being prepared for separation from my child. When the baby was born it cried. A living baby with eyes, ears, mouth, nose and limbs. It moved its limbs. My curiosity had been gratified. They took away that wonder that was mine. My baby! Radha, a loyal companion of mother, the one who had explained to me the mystery of birth, was given the child without revealing the parentage. She was asked to take the baby to her husband's home. Anyway my belly was emptied. Well, tomorrow I have to go to this child, and beg him for a favour." The image began to tremble once again.

"While the mountains were resurrecting my memories, two doctors from the land of the Devas came. They had a similar physical frame. Even gestures and features. They looked like twins. They wore no cotton clothes, only sheep-wool or goat skin. They always moved together. If a patient suffered from pain in the limbs or if he had dislocated bones, they would function jointly. One would hold the

patient while the other would tie up the bandages. They fetched the herbs jointly. While one powdered, the other squeezed the herbs. They were crazy about rice and wheat. Pandu supplied them to surfeit. They started treating the king. They began to administer medicine to restore his sexual potency. They would assure me from time to time that I would conceive a child, a strongly-built one. They would touch my belly and laugh. The people of the Deva land suffered no inhibitions in the matter of interaction between man and woman. The king took the medicine in full faith. My faith also was restored. Now dreams sprouted. I began to long for a baby to grow in my belly as earlier, and longed to draw all the mountain air into my lungs. Pritha has always been mad after children — how many? Ten, fifteen, twenty. With the lovely river flowing down from the land of the Devas, the mountain air loaded with the scent of Davana leaves, cardamom plants, and various flowers, and the reputed medicines of the Deva doctors, would Pandu not recover his lost virility and Pritha conceive children who could dance with their limbs and shriek and scream? The cold climate suited me. But my companion couldn't stand it.

She started coughing, and gasping for breath. In spite of my entreaties, she refused to go back home. The medicines of the Deva doctors did not help, and she succumbed. While I was mourning her death, news came from Hastinavati. The messenger who had come with a hundred donkeys loaded with provisions, had always been a confidant of king Pandu. He had personally come this time to give the news. We had been away from the kingdom for about a year. Bhishma had abandoned all hope of our return to the kingdom for more than six months now. Determined to promote the interest of the Kuru lineage and the welfare of Hastinavathi, he had got blind Dhritarashtra married.

King Pandu asked, 'Where is the girl from?'

The messenger, 'From Gandhara country. Which royal family in our land would offer a bride to a useless, blind fellow? In Gandhara they sell brides at bride-price. Remember how they got a bride for you from Madra country? In the same way. They went with chariots and horses, the army and carts loaded with wealth, well, a bride was somehow secured! secured!'

Pandu asked, 'Is it true that women from Gandhara are not subservient to their husbands, like our own Aryan women?' I was there by his side and there was none else.

The messenger replied, 'That's what they say. But she seems to be an even greater worshipper of a husband than any Aryan wife. The moment she learnt of her husband's blindness, she refused to see the world, covering her eyes with a band of cloth. She went with her

brother in a chariot. Even on ritual platform at the time of the marriage, she stood blind-folded. Performed the ritual of taking seven steps and then looking at the auspicious star, Arundhati, like a blind woman. The husband was born blind, but why should she vow to turn her eyes from the world? The citizens of Hastinavathi praise her as a great devotee of the husband, and fall reverentially at her feet.'

Pandu remarked, 'Elder brother is most fortunate.'

"That was my feeling, too. In their physical build the brothers were identical, more or less. But what can an eyeless person achieve? If one cannot hit a target with an arrow, how can one consider oneself a Ksatriya? Now he had a wife, totally devoted.

So, Gandhari had achieved a higher status than Kunti in the eyes of the people of Hastinavati. I never had any opportunity to earn the reputation of being a devoted spouse. Excepting, of course, for the fact that I had now gone all the way with my husband on his mission of penance. I grew somewhat jealous of her, jealous that she could go about as a great husband-worshipper, condemning herself to blindness in order to deny herself what had been denied to the husband. Yes. I was jealous. Why shouldn't I?"

As if in confidence, the messenger, lowering his voice, said, 'Bhishma refused the throne. And you came away here. They simply had to put some one, who could formally give authority to the administration. So Bhishma has put Dhritarashtra on the throne.'

Pandu, astonished, 'What? A sightless person...?' The messenger, It was in accordance with the Dharma meant for an extraordinary situation. After all, it would be Bhishma who would really govern.'

"I didn't worry too much about all this. Prince Dhritarashtra had, if he so desired, a whole lot of servant-girls in the palace to pick from. I did not know for certain whether he was already calling on their service. He was now married. Once again, my mind dissolved into dreams and memories. In the meanwhile winter was on us. And what a cold? None can even imagine anything remotely like it in Hastinavati or the city of Bhoja. It was a cold that fell in white flakes from the sky. A cold that clothed the mountains in white. The mountain to the south and the Deva mountain to the north, were all buried in white. Even the vegetation around our huts became covered with a thin layer of white. Yes, it was terribly cold, and yet enjoyable in its own way. The sight of white mountains out there enthused me. Made me feel like shouting with ecstasy. A number of Deva folk came down, accompanied by their goats, horses, loaded with belongings. The cold up there was believed to be too severe to permit normal living. This plain land was regarded as relatively

warmer. It seemed every winter some of them came down here in this way. Others descended to the plains through other routes. Those who came down to our spot, soon set up their own residences some three hours' walking distance from us. Our two doctors, too, had come in this group. We used to see them move close to our huts in search of animals to hunt or edible roots and fruits to gather. Occasionally when we offered them hot pancakes made of flour, what joy they felt! Our languages differed, though slightly. Their language was not wholly incomprehensible to us. They intoned their sounds loud enough to reach the skies. It was a language similar to the one in the Vedas. After all, they were Deva community. They were supposed to be divided into thirty-two clans. They had a system of collective marriage by which all women in a clan (Gana) were regarded as wives to all men in that clan, and all men were regarded as husbands to all women in it. Any woman of a clan could mate with any man of the same clan. Men and women had equal status and rights. The children born in a clan were regarded as children of the whole clan. Every woman was every man's wife, and every man, every woman's husband within a clan. They had no restrictive rules in the matter of sex, and no sense of shame in such matters. No discrimination in this matter was allowed, and if anybody discriminated, then the chief of the clan would punish the concerned person. Madri confided, 'In some ways, their system is better than ours. What do you think?' She added, 'Look, among them every woman walks about loaded with a child on her back. They have no barren women, as we have'. I was inclined to agree. They used no cotton garments. Both men and women wore thick wool clothes and looked like hill tribes. Once they took their clothes off, what attractive and splendid physique! Their skin was snow white, not brownish white like that of the Aryans. They were supposed to be original ancestors of the Aryans, supposed to be racially purer than us. Their customs and practices were the origin of ours. They were hardly aware of the customs of the Aryans in the plains, and those who knew something about them had nothing but contempt for them, as they thought them inferior and corrupt. In that place where we had so little contact with others, I was always happy to detain Deva visitors for a long chat. Madri, too, looked forward to meeting with them and talking with them. Of course, they were only too eager to see us because of their craze for our rice and wheat dishes. Their land did not grow these grains.

"After the messenger's departure, Pandu began to speak less often to me. He spent most of his time lying down, deep in thought. There was a cold that froze water into ice. The nights were especially cold, and Pandu sought warmth in my close embrace. More like a child huddling against the mother's body for warmth. In the early days he was voluble, but later he was mostly silent. During day time, I was

exploring the different sides of the mountain, and Madri would join me in this. We were only too hªPPy to run *nt0 Deva folk and carry on long conversation with them. Mostly we talked about their customs, their food habits, and their views. They, too, were interested in ours. Sometimes within the bounds of our plain we would come across a village within a distance of less than an hour. The village was just a collection of some five or six huts built along a path cut through the mountain. Below was a river which was crossable over a bamboo bridge. We would talk to the women there. Sometimes their women came in search of our company. The women, too, were eager for our grain dishes. After tasting them, they smacked their tongues. They had another custom. The brothers in a family married collectively. If there were four brothers, they would marry one, two, three or five brides, common to them all. The wives functioned collectively as wives of all the brothers. No matter which wife delivered a child, it was named after the eldest brother. Madri commented on this, 'Isn't this nice in a way?' I didn't openly say, 'Yes'. If we asked someone, 'How many wives do you have?' he would indicate four, raising four fingers. If we asked a woman about her husbands she would say, six. That means there were six brothers married to four wives. Then I and Madri would look at each other. Then Madri would add, 'Sister, let us get back to our hermitage.'

"Winter was on the way out. Already, the snows on our plain had melted into streams of water. The mountain still looked formidably snow-clad, chalk-white. No, there were occasional streaks of melted ice flowing into water even on the mountain-face. They looked like black strips on a white surface. One night Pandu woke me up by shaking my arm and said, 'Kunti, I should not have come here at all.'

I asked, 'Why? Is it because the medicines have not yet given any result?'

Pandu, 'Not merely that. Because I came away, uncle got Dhritarashtra married. His wife might conceive, perhaps she already has. Anyhow he is now on the throne. And then the Kuru kingdom will pass into his sons' hands. I was the first to occupy the throne and successfully accomplish a victory expedition, but I may have to rot in this mountainous land!'

"This had never occurred to me. Fear gripped me. Thanks to the regular supply of provisions from Hastinavati we had a smooth life here. Suppose tomorrow they cut off this supply! Then what? We would be forced to live like the Deva people or the hill tribes below, subsisting on roots and fruits, shearing sheep and goat for wool, and wearing clothes woven of woo), woven by ourselves. I heard the king sigh deeply. I said, 'Let's get away from here, back to our kingdom.'

Squeezing my arm, he replied, 'Yes, I have thought about it. We

came here for the purpose of penance. What is supposed to be the reward for that penance? We cannot return and show our face without accomplishing something. The people would laugh at us. How can we face uncle? If we had at least one child, it would be different.'

I asked, Didn't the medicines yield any result?'

He asked me, 'Is there no other way?' Then he fell silent. I asked myself, what other way is there? I remembered immediately what the mountains had forced me to remember. None knew of my secret after the death of my companion. I was tempted a number of times to makea clean breast of my past to my husband. Yet I had kept it a secret. Now I thought I should tell him, perhaps because it was the right moment, 'You do not know it, but we have a son. He may be now nine or ten years old' I blurted out.

Pandu, 'How come?'

I, 'Out of wedlock'. Then I was silent.

"The king also fell silent. I could not make out whether it was due to anger or contempt. Anyway my heart became lighter after unburdening the secret. After a while, the king spoke, Dow did this happen? Where is the boy now?'

"I narrated what had happened. I told him about my parents' plan to keep the child out of my life for ever. I continued, T do not know where he is now. I do not know where that low caste woman took him. If we went to my father's place, I am sure he will locate the child for us/ As I spoke, my enthusiasm waxed. How I was longing for the joy of discovering the son, for the joy of both of us bringing him up! My body thrilled at the idea. The king kept silent. Outside, the mountain wind was whistling. The wind that blew between mountains and across the plain. After a while, he came to me, calling me, 'Kunti'. Then he pushed his right hand through my dress to touch my belly. Pressing his right palm against my belly through my clothes several times, he said, 'Yours is a belly that is most fertile, ever ready to receive male seeds and reproduce. How I wish I had the power to sow my seeds.' Then he suddenly seized me, embraced me, his face hiding between my breasts, and began to sigh deeply, inhaling the warmth. In my mind I was trying to sketch that lost child of mine. My hands held tightly the king's head. The wind from the plains was blowing steadily. Was it blowing from front to back or the other way round? It was difficult to make out. Later on, after going back to Hastinavati, I came to know that even-grandmother Satyavathi, too, had a son out of wedlock. Now that son had the reputation of being a great expert in Vedic lore. It was this son born out of marriage who had produced my husband, Pandu, and his brother, Dhritarashtra,

through the Niyoga relationship with my two mothers-in-law. When this illegitimate son of Satyavathi visits Hastinavati, the entire population of the town falls at his feet. Then why did my father consign my son to anonymity? Why did they even keep me hidden indoors? It seems Satyavati is a fisher-woman. Among the fisher-folk there is no bar on offering in marriage boys and girls without regard to legitimacy. In fact, the girl with a child out of wedlock was accepted with the child. Why then should we start attaching shame to such practices? The voice of the wind dropped. The huge mountains stood there, real and silent. Moonlight or cloud-covered sky it is hard to tell. Why should the sense of shame, absent in Hastinavati, worry our people in Kunti Bhoja?

I asked him, ‘King, you have taken me as your wife. Then doesn’t my son become your son?’

He, "I know the rules prevalent in the past. But now if we seek out that boy and take him to Hastinavati, the people wouldn’t accept him. Don’t you see that this acceptance should have been effected right at the time of our marriage?’

"Then my mind went back to my own wedding ceremony. I thought to myself: How nice it would have been if I had my son, either perching on my waist or standing near me, when I garlanded my bride-groom so that he received both mother and child as formally his! I recalled what my father had then said to my mother. He had said, These days young men do not want to wed such girls. Otherwise why should we have to keep it concealed? Don’t I know that my daughter suffers pangs being deprived of her child?’ I thought, what a mess, what a tangle! I felt like cutting away from everything. But where then can one go? Clasping the head of my helpless husband tight to my body helplessly I went to sleep.

The king repeatedly and gently passed his hand across my belly, perhaps with admiration. I had the feeling that he was trying to say something. I was half sure what he would say. I embraced him passionately, kissed him, and whispered in his ear, "Please, tell me, king, tell me."

He said, ‘If Dhritarashtra produced children first, we shall be in ruins.’

I, ‘Tell me, what I should do. I shall do whatever you say.’

He, ‘Your womb would never go dry and waste any seed sowed in it. Well, give me a child. Soon. Do you understand?’

"I knew very well what the moral and religious norms had to say in the matter. One’s own priest is entitled to be a donor of sperms. But our priest from Hastinavati who had accompanied us first, had run

back to the town unable to withstand the bone chilling cold of the mountains. The king himself took charge of the rituals. The priest would return only after the end of winter and the beginning of the milder and pleasanter weather. But there was no waiting possible now. The sooner, the better. I later, pieced together the truth that the king had planned it all to the last detail.

"He sent for the Brahmin chief of the Deva land. The person, thoroughly versed in the ancient and traditional Dharma, and competent to judge people's behaviour and award punishment, came. As soon as I saw him I remembered sage Durvasa. The same kind of beard, the same type of face. But he wore a thick garment of wool. His body buried in it. Middle-aged. A voice straight and loud enough to pierce the skies. He was all admiration for the meal we gave him. I was on fire with desire. I was eager. Earlier, with Durvasa I was propelled by innocent curiosity. Now I knew' what I was after. The goal, the desire, the passion. Suddenly the memory of all those days of body's pining and learning rushed to me. However, Yama who had come at the entreaty of my husband showed no visible enthusiasm and eagerness. He was an ever content person. He appeared indifferent to me as a new kind of woman. Who knows how many women from his clan he had enjoyed!

He asked, 'King, you are talking about Niyoga. What religious and moral authority do you have in support of it?'

Pandu, 'If the husband is physically impotent or if he dies without children^ it may be performed on the wife in order to perpetuate his lineage...'

He guffawed, the laughter loud enough to invade the skies. Then he said, 'Good God, it is so funny. You have distorted the original Dharma beyond recognition, taking it to God knows where! If one man dies in the clan, aren't there hundred others? We do not have this Niyoga system, and we do not need it. I have knowledge of Dharma. That is why I have been given the task and office of supervising and maintaining Dharma.'

Pandu, 'Dharmaraja, you know' that the original Dharma can take local forms, the Desācāra. It is another face of Dharma. Our custom is different, and it is like the way I have suggested. One king can have only one chief queen, though he may have other wives. One woman can have only one husband, and she cannot have more than one husband. Therefore I entreat you to perform Niyoga in accordance with our Dharma.'

Dharmaraja, 'All right. Since we do not have such a custom, ourlaws d'O not explicitly prohibit it. Our law is quite definite about one thing. It totally bans the practice of treating a wife as a man's

exclusive possession and property. Since I am not going to wed her, I can do what you have asked for, without infringing our Dharma.'

"Pandu made me promise mat I would not fall in love with the Deva who was expected to sow his sperm in my womb. When he was physically close to me my mind was to be totally oriented towards my husband. I had to divest myself of all desires excepting one — the desire for a child. I had to make up my mind to regard him as a parent immediately after he impregnated me successfully. I was expected, the moment this happened, to shun his company..."

"I swore to do this. That reflection, with its big eyes in an emaciated face and white hair, told her- I made the promise asked for, unflinchingly. The part of the promise that I should be physically away from him the moment my menstruation stopped, was fulfilled. I had no idea of doing injustice to Pandu. But the overall promise had contained the impossible. Which woman who had been done Niyoga so far had regarded the male who had performed Niyoga as a parent — including my mothers-in- law, Ambalike and Ambike? Did Krishna Dvaipayana who performed Niyoga on my mothers-in-law regarded them as daughters? Can the Niyoga act be performed with such feelings and attitudes?" The wrinkles on the reflected face in the water contracted, and the eyes in the face half-closed. From the day the Niyoga operation commenced, king Pandu lived with Madri in the hut at the back. The Deva Dharmadhikari took Pandu's place in my hut. I started attending to his comforts and needs. I used to bathe him in hot water and then dry his body and clothe it. I used to cook fabulous feasts and feed him with my own hands. I would dress his rice with more ghee, than was poured into the ritual fire. Born a princess, I was accustomed more to being served than serving. Excepting, of course, in the case of sage Durvasa. I had in the early days of married life entertained the idea of serving Pandu. But he failed to deserve it. For him, I could only muster sympathy, compassion, pity. But Pandu never evoked in me any wish to surrender to him as his servant-maid, massaging his feet. But with the Deva Niyogi, I felt like serving him, surrendering to him. This came quite naturally. He neither wished for it nor asked for it.

One day the Deva himself said, 'Kunti, in your world, do all wives serve their husbands as you do me?'

I counter-questioned, 'What about your world?'

He, 'You do all this because you have attachment to only one husband, isn't that true? In our world, none knows which husband or which wife will wait for one on the bed when the night falls. Our women insist on men giving them pleasure. They do not serve men like you.' He not only spoke these words, but his love intensified, as he confessed, 'I regard the time lived with you as the most fortunate

time of my life!'

"Yes, I had conceived, and the vomiting started. I became overjoyed. The first retching happened one dawn. I went out, in the cold. The mountain peaks shone brighter than the moon. It was a peaceful, gentle light. I stood watching them, totally absorbed. Again the memories returned. Then I did not understand it. Now I do. Absolutely. I stood like that for a long time. Then I went in. Closing the door I returned to the bed, to his body, he embraced me tightly, and said, 'You vomitted. Yes the seed has settled in.'

I whispered in his ear, Do not say it openly, please. If once it is recognised, the king is sure to ask you to go back.' He sighed, and then embraced me with desperation.

"It is not easy to endure vomitting, especially one due to pregnancy. Madri had better knowledge of things. She lived in the hut behind. She was watchful, her whole body becoming eyes, ears and nose. How could she be without jealousy? I would try my best not to reveal the secret, especially through vomitting. Even if I could manage to keep the secret from them for a day, it meant extending the duration of my fortune and bliss. In the empty noon time, Pandu would ask me with urgency, 'Kunti, are there indications, symptoms of your conception?' My standard reply was, There is still time for it.' But how long could I postpone the hour of truth? One morning the vomitting burst out with violence, destroying all my efforts to contain it. Its sound travelled not merely to Madri's hut but all over the hermitage, as if echoing in the mountains. Madri hurried towards me, and said, 'Sister, we will not lose our kingdom.' In the acute agony in my belly I could not be certain whether her heart was filled with pure joy at what had happened or whether it was fired with the jealous desire to put an immediate end to my happiness with the Deva priest. She was the one who conveyed first the news to the king. He came running towards me. He held my hand. Then he ran up to the Dharmadhikari and held his hand. That same day he got a magnificent bull slaughtered for a grand banquet in gratitude to the Deva priest. It was evening by the time we finished the banquet. There was no time for the guest to leave. It was therefore decided that he should stay back that night and leave in the morning. But the priest was now asked to sleep in the hut meant for him. The king came to my side, and began to fondle me with joy and affection as my belly had sprouted his lineage, giving it a new lease of life. Who could fathom my pain, sorrow and even feeling of contempt? The next morning, before the guest left, I made my obeisance by falling at his feet and squeezing them. The king appealed to him, 'Dharmadhikari, please, bless your daughter.'

"The dream was over. But a new dream began to take shape. The

dream of a living being that would flap its hands and legs, and cry sky-high to be carried. The trees, the grassy meadows, hills and mountains, all seemed to flap their limbs and ejaculate. The dream was punctuated by interludes of acute pain. Then all the snow melted, flowing into water, and the body of the mountain turned bright green with vegetation. We had a temperate weather, devoid of any trace of cold. A row of donkeys loaded with provisions came from Hastinavati. This time, too, the same messenger accompanied the supply. He brought the news that our priest was lying sick and that he wouldn't be returning to us, to this place of coldness. More to the point, he told us that Gandhari had yet to become pregnant. The-servant-maids in the palace were whispering that Gandhari and her brother were eager to see her pregnant. The customs of her home town were very different from ours, it was said. A woman's children were placed under the charge of her brother. Therefore her brother Sakuni had arrived to live there. After all, he belonged to a poor, hilly tribe. He must have chosen to come here, loving the comforts we have. That was the messenger's guess. With the end of winter, the Deva folk packed up their tents and goods, and returned to their mountain land. We of the hermitage were left all alone, excepting for people in the few near-by villages. Once again flowers blossomed. Water dripped and flowed near the roots of trees and plants. It was all light and pleasant green everywhere. It was a temperate summer, neither too cold nor too warm. Then the tumultuous and torrential rainy season. The rushing, tunnelling waters of the mountains. After the rains, and winter returned, as the dark green and the mild winds disappeared. It was at that time that the baby was born. It was the desired male child. With a face as calm as the snows, white skin, and as soon as it touched the earth it cried. I longed to see it. Though there were Madri and the servants to help me, it was Pandu himself who took the responsibility for looking after my post-delivery needs. To keep me warm, he saw to it that the fire from the fuel in the hut did not extinguish. If the baby woke up and cried, it was he who cajoled and persuaded it to sleep by his side. The priest who could chant the mantras was not there, and the king himself had to rig up and perform the ritual to mark the birth of the baby. The problem of naming the baby occasioned considerable debate. Pandu recalled the most distinguished ancestors in the Kuru lineage. Eventually it was decided, to name the baby Dharma. It was chosen not only because it was born by the grace of the Dharmadhikari, but also because it was a baby that had given king Pandu the status of a father, and it was also a child born according to the ancient Dharma, the moral law. The king himself gave all these reasons for the choice of the name. As it happened, the sages who halted with us on their way to the Badarika hermitage, approved the name.

All winter I was kept warm in my confinement. The baby sucked

my breasts till its mouth overflowed with milk. One day the king said, as he fondled the baby resting on his laps, wrapped with a blanket, ‘Kunti, this child looks auspicious. His temperament is even. He never cries.’

‘Yes. Babies should be rough, flexing their limbs and shouting. It is then that they look lovely.’

‘But this baby is too grave and quiet. His body frame is also slight. The inadequacy of the semen explains why a woman of your generous and ample proportions should yield a baby of this physique. After all, the Dharmadhikari is an expert only in moral and religious matters. He is not a warrior.’ I was silent. But I was curious to know what he had in mind. He himself came out with it, saying, Took, a Ksatriya attains fame by having a brave, warrior son. I think this baby is meant for other-worldly concerns. I shall be satisfied only if you can give me a warrior son through the seeds of a warrior/

"This reply was unexpected. I was happy that the king on his own was providing me with a second opportunity. It was all the better for being unsolicited. Perhaps he did not know that this Kunti yearned to mother not ten, but twenty children, enthusiastically. I took Dharma in my arms and kissed him. ‘King, who knows better than you what the needs of a Ksatriya are? It shall be my duty to fulfill them as your chief queen. Order me. Don’t hesitate or feel inhibited.’ I said.

A fortnight after this conversation, the two doctors from the Deva land visited us. Both examined king Pandu. They gave him the new herbs and roots they had brought and said, ‘These will give you power and strength. In one year you will regain your potency to produce children.’

"The king was happy. I thought that Pandu’s faith and confidence in these two doctors would endure through days, months and years. He broached the subject of his interest with the doctors, Tt is true my eldest son was born through your Dharmadhikari. But he is not as strong and powerful as I desired. I want a very powerful person to produce a mighty warrior son. Is there any one like that?’

After some thinking, they said, ‘Yes, there is such a person. The chief commander of our army. We call our army the Maruta group. We make the most powerful person in the Deva land our thief commander.’

Pandu, ‘Will he accede to my request?’

The doctors, ‘Perhaps he will, if we request him. Only if the Deva land is free from enemies. Otherwise he will be busy. If you can send her to him, it might not interfere with his duties.’

"The king paused for a moment to think, and then said, ‘No, she

cannot be sent. You must see to it that he himself comes down here for the purpose. I am prepared to reward him in any manner he likes!'

Doctors, 'Well, then, you accompany us now. We can discuss the matter with him.'

"Taking two servants with him, the king went with the doctors, climbing the northern mountain. It took him fifteen days to come down. Then Madri told me about the group of Devas who had come down to camp that winter. She said that they too were married collectively, all men marrying all women. On the fifteenth day the king returned supporting himself on a staff. He had accomplished the task for which he had journeyed. The commander- in-chief had promised to come down after seven days. He told me, 'Kunti, what a powerful person he is! I have never met his equal in the entire Aryan land. He is so tall that I had to stand straightand raisemy arms towards his neck. Not only height. He has a matching frame, ample shoulders, and large feet. It may be difficult for you to conceive the seed of such a mighty warrior.'

I, 'Shouldn't I have to become the mother of the heroes of the Kuru lineage?'

"The king was gratified. He gave a smile that cancelled the journey-weariness. I fondled his back gently, and asked him, 'Why are you so exhausted?' Resting his head on my lap, he slept. I embraced him, fondling his back. Like a child, he contracted his legs, hid his face against my thighs, and closed his eyes. Every minute he sighed. I coddled him, asking, 'Why this tiredness?'

Pandu said, 'That Deva land is beyond us, beyond our capacity to survive. Just look at the formidable mountain staring at us. Even to climb it exhausts us. In that mountain, let alone walking, even mere staying is hard, our breath becomes short. Often unable to climb I just stretched flat, resting my legs. Perhaps if these doctors had not been with me I might well have collapsed and died! They picked up some herb near by, squeezed its juice and made me drink it. After resting a while we proceeded slowly. Not only for me, even for those two of our servants with me it was the same. They too were exhausted. Do you know how it is up there? Even in summer it appears as snow-covered as it does here in winter. It is all nothing but mountains — mountains and more mountains! The Dazzling white peaks! The cold is simply unlivable. We went on, on and on. Only these Deva persons know their way around in that world of mountains, sure of which way to go, which turn to take. They assured me that none could invade their land and conquer them in these unconquerable mountains. I could believe it. Even a tough warrior like me finds himself short of breath climbing these heights. Where

then is the question of anyone conquering them? As a matter of fact, after reaching their town I slept for three days continuously, resting. Even then my heart did not stop beating fast. I felt tempted to stay longer but decided to come away after completing negotiations with Maruta, that army chief. Now climbing down has been no less exhausting. The fast heart-beat continued. The doctors have advised me complete rest.'

"I agreed with him. My child Dharma slept to one side, and, on the other, lay Pandu. I embraced him, and massaged his body, hands and legs, happy to serve him. The king moaned, 'Kunti, princess, you had never served me like this before!' I assured him that from then on I would serve him. He slept, not like a child, but like a sick person. Yes, I had pity, even affection. I was seized by a desire to serve him, take care of him. That night he slept like a log, excepting for a couple of occasions when he groaned, 'Kunti'. It took him some five or six days to recover from the strain and exhaustion. His face became more cheerful. But he continued to breathe hard when climbing any height. But in that uneven land, how could one avoid climbing up and down? So he was forced to stay indoors most of the time.

"On the seventh day came the army chief of the Devas precisely at the time when the day was declining. He was accompanied by ten body-guards. When I saw him, I wondered why he should need any body-guards at all! He was so tall that even a tall woman like me had to raise her head to look at him. As described by Pandu he had a terrific physique, high and ample shoulders. The face lacked sensitive feelings. Not cruel, though. Appeared quite calm.! was standing before him. He asked, Is this your wife?' staring at me. I sensed desire in those intense eyes of his. His voice was as loud as that of the winds that moaned in the mountain valleys. The king spoke words of welcome. Hot water was got ready for his bath. The king ordered the slaughtering of a sheep for dinner in honour of the guest. He asked the guest about the welfare of all those persons in the Deva land whom he had met. As a hostess I took the lead in looking after his comforts. Madri did not stir out of her hut. The king went to her to put the child under her care.

"After the dinner that night, the king got me to take the same promise - 'I shall not love this man, even while in his arms I shall think only of my husband. I shall desire nothing from him but a child, and as soon as I conceive I shall regard him as a parent..'

The splendour of Maruta's body exceeded anything I could imagine. Even when I embraced him with both my arms, I could not hook my right fingers with my left fingers behind his back! He was solid and hard as stone. I doubted whether I was adequate for him. Till that time I was proud of being Pritha, one with a big body. Now

that pride melted and disappeared. He asked me, ‘What is your name?’ I lisped, ‘Pritha’. He replied, ‘Oh, I see! Because you possess a big body? Is this what you call a big physique in your world?’ I answered, ‘Nowhere near your proportions.’

He asked, ‘Have you ever seen our women?’

‘In the winter one group of your people was here. I saw them then.’

He, "No, we, too, do not have women as big as you. Yes, Pritha fits you.’ Then as his love for me intensified, his strength manifested better. I developed a feeling of gratitude to King Pandu. And what an excellent choice! I longed to be pounded, my flesh squeezed, my bones crushed, all ready to be consumed with passion. I felt like surrendering myself totally to his body, be his complete slave grovelling at his mercy. The next day I arranged for a huge vessel of hot water. I personally bathed him, going over his body with great solicitude.

"I scraped his capacious back with a sharp piece of stone to remove the dried up sweat. Then leading him slowly to the bed, I got him to lie down. I cooked his food and fed him personally. I also yearned to wash his hand after food. But he was not inclined to sleep. After the morning meal, he went out to hunt, accompanied by his body-guards. I saw him fade out of sight. What a huge physique! How he negotiated the mountain heights, as fast as a rabbit ! No tiring, no resting ! I stood transfixed, watching him climb the lesser mountain opposite the Deva country, the bow on his shoulder and the sword in his hand. He returned from the hunt in the evening, triumphantly, a dead tiger on his shoulder. His companions carried the pieces of meat carved out of the hunted animals — a wild bull and four deer. He personally skinned the tiger and hung the skin out for drying. Pandu was pleased. He plied the hunter with questions: ‘Where was the tiger? How did he kill it?’ I was then busy in the kitchen, supervising the cooking.

"I felt confident that night that I could handle him. I recalled all the skills Madri had taught me. I employed them in the bed, and matched him. At mid-night he said, ‘Pritha, I never knew that there was so much joy in a woman’s arms, till tonight. A woman should wage a war on a man in bed. What satisfaction can come from a woman who hides in a man’s arms for protection like a child.’

"I did not grasp immediately the meaning of his words. Gradually the meaning dawned on me. My eyes filled with tears. I did not know whether I should pull him hard to my chest or let his head rest on my thighs or I should massage his limbs. His judgement of me in bed was simple, ‘No woman in Deva land is even fit to be your servant-maid.’ What more could I want? His grateful appreciation gave me a

measure of my own strength and power. Then I understood fully what he was saying. I had the ; power to calm a hero, a mighty hunter who would bring home a dead tiger, and make him feel safe in my arms. My arms? My breasts? My body-frame? An ordinary male might feel their presence real. For this extraordinary male whom even I could not see without raising my head, they were not real. Yes, I understood my own power. That whole night I slept drowned in the joy of that realisation.

"The next morning I once again gave him a good bath in hot water. I tended him with solicitude. Served him affectionately. He did not think of hunting that day, preferring to stay home. Instead he sat me before himself, held my hands, and looked deep into my face. I blushed, bending my head down. Then he lifted my face with ‘ his broad palms, and said, 'Pritha, come away to our Deva land with me. You know we permit chiefs of a clan to possess private wives, exclusively for their enjoyment. Come away and be my wife.’ In reply I stared at his face. He looked humble and gentle. His eyes registered a greater fulfilment in me than I had in him.

I said, ‘Our systems of marriage and yours are different.’ He did not reply immediately. After a while, I am not sure how he understood the situation, but he said, ‘If you wish I shall refrain from connections with other women in the clan. I shall have none but you, only you. I swear.’ Then he took hold of my hand. I simply bowed my head. He continued, T want to prove I am a greater warrior than I am now. I can do that under your protection.’ Then added, ‘There is plenty of time. Think over it.’ I didn’t reply. Silence enveloped us. Perhaps he found it embarrassing to stay there, and, gathering his bow and sword, he went out. His body-guards were asleep after a sumptuous meal, and he did not wake them. I was overwhelmed with a feeling of achievement. At the Svayamvara, hundreds of kings and princes had assembled to win me. Even there I had a sense of self-importance. Now I could see it. Since it was an occasion when all the rulers congregated, some desirable and others unworthy, there was inevitably much gambling and carousing. None of them was strongly motivated by the sole desire to marry me. Now this warrior among warriors on whom they are not a patch, was begging for my hand with such reverence. He was even prepared to promise that he would abjure all other women of his clan. Which Ksatriya in our Aryan land does not indulge in sex with woman other than his wife? Such thoughts made me feel supremely content. I said to myself: ‘Pritha, you are fortunate.’ I was strongly tempted to go with him and live with him, who was not lacking in semen-strength to bring forth into the world ten children like him, bearing them in my belly. I felt like telling Pandu, ‘King Pandu, I am leaving. I shall give you this child I have borne for you. If you are not interested, you can get children out of Madri through Niyoga.’ If ony I said ‘Yes’, he would

carry me on his shoulders, and leap over mountains that hid the Deva land, like a tiger! I was all alone in the hut. Unable to bear the burden of thinking, I went out, I saw Madri standing near the stream below, with Dharma, the ever-calm and never-crying Dharma, my child, perching on her waist. The child Dharma suited Madri's build and form, but he was too small for*my big body. I descended to reach the stream. The child made gestures to say that it wanted me to carry it. I gathered the child. Madri, obviously referring to Maruta, said, 'Doesn't he have a frame that can crush you?' She looked into my face and smiled. I was not myself.

"That night, too, he pleaded, What did you decide? Look here. Even if you said, no, I have the power to carry you away forcefully on my shoulder. That sickly king Pandu is hardly a match for me. Do you think your servants can halt me? Also remember I have ten body-guards on my side. But I know it is impossible to carry you off like that. After having touched your body and knowing it, I am sure all women who can be carried off like that, are contemptible in my eyes.'

"My power of speech vanished. He went on urging me to speak, repeatedly. He sighed like an over-exhausted person. As if to speak for both of us, he said, There are still many days in which you can think and decide.' Both of us slept silently and still. Outside the hut, the mountain wind whistled. Far away, the cry of a bear occasionally disturbed the quiet. By the time I could sleep daylight was flowing into the hut. He was also tossing on the bed.

"When I got up in the morning he was not there. The bow and the sword were also not there. I rose and took my bath. I saw his body-guards standing on a stone slab behind the hut, and pointing to something with their fingers. One of them was shooting an arrow with his bow, as if it was in fun. I was stunned and my mind paralysed. I did not go to the hut behind and take Dharma in my arms. I did not speak to Madri. I simply returned to my hut and sat. I sat on that same soft, grass-woven, mattress covered with a thick, warm blanket. After a while king Pandu came. His face looked worn out. He sat close to me but below on the ground, like a commoner standing near a throne! I stared at his face vacuously. He appeared to find it very difficult to say what he wanted to say, struggling hard to find words. With hesitation and labour, he said, 'Kunti, I have heard what he was asking you, yesterday morning and night. He has such a loud voice. I was listening behind the wall.'

"I did not get scared. Something far deeper than fear, confusion and anger was eating up my mind. My ears merely heard the sound of his words, but my mind was elsewhere, stirring up something', I knew not what, deeper than my consciousness. Dumb-struck,

uncomprehendingly, I looked at his face. He caught my hand. I found his hand weak. He spoke, his voice choking with emotion, 'Remember the promise you made. It is merely for the purpose of producing brave sons for the lineage and under my order.' Unable to speak further, he tightened his grip on my hand. Silently I said to myself, 'Only to give warrior sons to the Kuru lineage and under his orders' ... Thoughts overflowed but the throat became chocked. How can these people know and appreciate the sacrifice of my own happiness for this lineage! If there had been another husband who was using as a pretext a wife's promise, was prepared to sacrifice his wife's entire happiness he would have understood. Duryodhana is believed to have given a new interpretation of Dharma, saying that the Pandavas were merely sons of Kunti. My toothless mouth closed tight with anger. I asked myself, 'What is Dharma ?' I said to myself, 'this Kunti had never failed in the matter of Dharma as she understood it.' I began to separate the layers of the past mixed up in memory. It was getting late in the evening. The pain that had started up my waist began to decline. The bravest among brave warriors, who had fought a tiger single-handed, begged for my hand with a voice more choked than Pandu's, and the choking did not result from helplessness, as in Pandu's case.

"Every night he would beg me with tear-filled eyes. Resting against my broad bosom, pouring hot tears in sorrow! I too had shed vesselful of tears on his chest. Yet, after I conceived, I informed Pandu voluntarily, consoled poor Maruta, pleading with him to accept final separation, and though he stayed on for eight days more I abjured his bed! Had, Kunti, no commitment to Dharma? My own mind interpreted my memory. What a terrific son Bhima proved to be! Maruta had said, 'Pritha,you with your auspicious temperament and I with my physical and sexual prowess — do you know what a wonderful son we will jointly produce? If we were to go to the Deva land, I am sure they would automatically pick him as the army chief.' Such a brave warrior is my son. Prior to their departure for exile in the forest, I had told Draupadi, 'Never scrimp where Bhima's feeding is concerned. If his strength is reduced, we will ail be lost.' But what sort of feeding could she have offered to him during those twelve years of tribulation, when they had to live on roots and fruits and the roasted meat of hunted animals! Krishna told me that Bhima had good nourishment in Virata town employed as a cook! He is a real child, a child among children. Carrying him perched on her waist for even ten steps would exhaust Madri. Father Pandu would fare even worse, gasping for breath. Forgiving love and affection, Bhima is the best. His is an unbroken, limitless love of which his father, Maruta, was capable. Bhima must be now fifty-three or fifty-four. Thirteen years' exile had made his back a little bent, but even so how can the original frame with which one is born easily go? He was so tall that

an average person could equal his height only by fully raising his hand! Draupadi's height didn't come up even to his shoulder. Yet he is her total slave. Such a daughter-in-law had to spend twelve years in exile and one year in servitude. After the arrival of two sons, the elder who was peacefulness incarnate, and the second who would instil courage and confidence in anyone, why did king not agree to go back to Hastinavati? But he was obsessed with the idea of getting cured by the medicinal skill of the Deva doctors! He had blind faith in their curative powers, unshakable faith in the possibility of recovering his sexual potency. Or was it merely the desire to produce a child from his own seed? If he had produced children through his own seeds, he might well have looked down on the children born through Niyoga. I would have demanded from him observance of Dharma by catching not merely Ks hand, but by tweaking his nose! That desire must have persisted. Otherwise why did he choose to stay? He went on currying the favour of the Deva doctors by loading them with grain. I wondered why he chose to stay. The breathing problem he suffered from because of his trip to the Deva land, could not be fully cured by the Deva doctors. He never recovered the strength to climb the mountains. Had he decided then to return to occupy the throne, the path of events would have been different. All this tribulation would have been avoided, and we would not have fallen into the present plight ", Kunti thought as she stared at the water. The image stayed intact even when the water ran! She wondered, how was it possible? The mind was lost for a short while in this puzzle." But in the mountains, how can running water exude peacefulness? How hard it was to carry one-year old Bhima, and he had not yet picked up walking. How happy this child who had not yet learnt to speak was when bathed in a nearby waterfall. He was not scared by the cold or the heat. Yes it was around this time that Indra came. Yes, it was at that time all right." She began to disentangle the strands of memory." Yes, he came at that time. What handsome looks! Long and sharp nose, thin eye-brows, white as snow, around my height, and an upper garment of wool embroidered with a design of peacock feathers. He came to where the child was being given a wash, and stood. A little distance away were his servants with bows. They appeared to have come to carry me off! But it was a gentle, peaceful face.

He asked, 'You are Pritha, aren't you?' His tone was one of familiarity.

Adjusting my wet saree, I asked, 'Who are you?'

He, 'Oh, this must be our Maruta's child. You recognise it immediately you see his face, the child has Deva features.'

I then made out that he was from, the Deva groups. I now recalled

the bit of information given by Dharmadhikari and Maruta about the dress and ornaments of the most important persons in the Deva land. Yet, I asked, ‘You haven’t yet told me who you are.’

'I am Indra’.

‘Which means…’

T see, you know it, but want to know it from me. The king of the Deva land, Indra, that’s who I am. I was chosen to this position five years ago.’

I said, not knowing what more to say, 'Is that so?’ I was feeling shy. I bowed my head. But I felt embarassed. Then I lifted my head. I did not see his servants. He moved closer to me. Holding cut his hand, he asked for the child. Bhima had been never known to cry when strangers took him. It was a new face, and there was the shining garment woven of peacock feathers — green and blue. The child went to him and clasped him. He embraced it and kissed it profusely. Out there in the background, the falling water steadily. Seating the baby on his lap, he addressed me, ‘Sit down for a little while, I want to talk to you.’

Overcome with a sense of shame, I whispered, ‘What kind of talk can there be between you and me?’

That didn’t make him angry. He smiled gently, instead. Kissing the baby more profusely, he said, 'Pritha, we have thirty-two clans in our land. In each clan, all women are wives of all men, and all men husbands of all women. You must have known this by now. But a male from one clan is strictly forbidden to touch a woman from another clan. Only Indra, their king, is permitted to enjoy any woman from any clan. A woman regards it as her highest honour that Indra came to her.’

‘But then I am not from your land.’

‘But you are not wholly a stranger to our land either. Our army chief Maruta assured me that no brave warrior can understand what is well-being until he gains your favour and grace. I believe you refused his offer to take you as his wife. He understood your dilemma. Only the chiefs of the clans and Indra have the privilege to take personal wives, exclusively for themselves. I am already a married man. I am not allowed to marry another wife. Yet I am here to beg you to grant me a favour. After seeing you, I can understand his words better. I can now believe that they are absolutely true.’

"His words, so directly delivered, so frankly uttered, almost stopped my breath! Try however hard, I could not hold my head straight. The baby was ejaculating, sitting on his lap. I had the feeling that, unforeseen, I was trapped by his words and looks, like a fly

caught in a beehive.

He replied slowly, T have brought with me twenty tough and brave, hand-picked archers, in case I need them. Carrying you off presents no problem. But I see why Maruttha said that it was, in fact, impossible, after seeing you!'

"I found it embarassing to sit there without speaking. I had the impression that he was able to understand my inner feelings and thoughts by merely reading my face. I made up my mind not to tell lies. But I found it difficult to open my mouth while looking at his face. Turning away my eyes from him and towards the falling waters, I said, 'In our world a married woman can have no truck with any man other than her husband. It is prohibited.'

'Yes, the same rule holds in our world, too. You welcomed the Dharmadhikari and the army chief to your body, according to your own system of Niyoga, didn't you? Well, receive me in the same way, to perform Niyoga.'

'If one is a widow, the situation is different. When a husband is alive, only he can permit the Niyoga, choosing the person for it. Besides, we already have two children. If we now talk of Niyoga, it would be nothing short of blatant debauchery.' "By that time I could look at him and speak, I could converse with him more easily. I went on staring at his face, with eyes defeated and dissolving. After all, he was a ruler, and he did not find it difficult to find a way out I could see it in his face.

'Well, that means you agree. I am grateful. Now you go home. I shall return after a while, and negotiate with your husband. I am sure he will agree. He is bound to agree. As a wife you indicate your willingness to have another Niyoga. Persuade him to agree to it. Won't you?'." He got up, and held my hand, as if to extort a promise.

"With shame, my head bent low. He pushed the child to the crook of my arm. Quickly I climbed up the bank of the flowing water, and returned to my hut. The water-fall was left behind. I was thrown into utter mental confusion, a number of feelings jostling with one another—worry, joy, lightness and heaviness of heart. The king was reclining on the bed, playing with Dharma. Bhima in my arm began to cry because we had suddenly shifted from open sunlight to the dimness of the interior. I set him down by his father's side, and went out in the sun, to change the wet clothes, and to dry my head. I could not drive away from my mind the form of Indra, it had bore deep into my consciousness. What eyes he had! Blue eyes sharp enough to capture the entire range of mountains in its sweep. Long, pointed nose, his chin, and his whole face. After a while five archers came, and then said that they wanted to see king Pandu. Hearing the noise

of their arrival, the king came out of the hut. They informed him that the Lord and king of Deva world, Indra, had come down to see him, waiting near the water-fall. The king was overwhelmed. He told them, '1 would have myself received him, welcomed him. But if I climb down to meet him there, I would find it very hard to climb back. It would tire me so on. So please tell him to grace us with his visit to our hut.'

"Indra arrived, in royal style, surrounded by warriors. The king asked me to order dishes made of curds, ghee, honey and sugar, in honour of the guest. Pandu seated the guest on the mat woven of Darbha grass, and ceremonially welcomed the guest. He had already met him in the Deva land, and had some acquaintance with him. They exchanged greetings and news of mutual welfare. The body-guards were resting on the mountain slope. I sat outside the hut with my two sons, listening with rapt attention to the verbal skill of Indra.

Pandu, 'Indra, I consider it my good fortune that you are visiting me. Had it been Hastinavati, I would have received you with royal courtesies. Please do not take the poverty of the hut to be a poverty of heart. To what do I owe your august visit?'

Indra, 'I learn that your brother Dhritarashtra had a child, a son, the same age as your second son's.'

Pandu, 'Yes. I got the news.'

Indra, 'Which means that your sons and his sons are bound to fight over the kingdom.'

Pandu, 'Yes. It looks like that.'

Indra, 'You see, your brother who has been there all these days, right there in the saddle, has used the royal treasury to bribe and enlist the support of the public as well as the army. If a war breaks out tomorrow, who will be on the side of your sons?' "

'The king did not say a word. I could imagine the deep worry that must have invaded his face.

Indra, 'You got your two sons by the grace of the Deva people. Our people are now keen on giving you one more heroic son. I have been sent for that purpose. On your behalf, Maruta begged me to go-'

Pandu, 'Lord of Devas, a sonless person can resort to Niyoga to get a son or at the most two. I already have two.'

Indra, 'Your elder son can hardly grow into a warrior. And you are left with one son.' Then Indra paused. After a little while, he continued, 'Indra has a right of use over all wives in all clans. Besides, I have our dancers. You have seen them yourself. My first duty is to serve them. I am fed up with women, and have little

interest in them. But our people insisted on helping you to take charge of your kingdom so that the bonds of friendship between them and you can be strengthened. They entreated me to help you get another warrior son. Of course, if you are not interested, I shall leave.'

Pandu was silent for a brief time. Then he said, 'Lord and king of the Devas. I am grateful to the Deva people. I cannot deny your people their wish. I pray to you that you must perform Niyoga.'

Indra said, 'So be it!' A little later Pandu prayed, 'Indra, I have two wives. The elder has sons. The younger cannot be ignored. But without the consent of the elder, Niyoga cannot be done on the younger. I shall ask the elder for this. You must bless the younger with a child.'

Indra answered, 'I am here merely to give you a gift. It matters little to me as to through which wife you want to receive it. But I should point out that your elder wife has already proved her ability to bear Deva children in the cases of Dharmadikari and Maruta. Don't you think that Indra's semen should fertilise a womb of proven ability? Well, it is for you to consider what is in your interest. Think about it and then decide.'

"Requesting the guest to take rest, the king left the hut. By then I had walked away some distance from the hut. Then he took me near a tree and begged me to consent to Niyoga once again. Indra had his banquet. As before, the king took from me the same old promise, that I shall not love the man; that I shall regard him as a parent immediately after the conception ...

'This Indra was not only incredibly handsome. He was immensely clever. He possessed more than physical prowess, he was expert in arts. In the night he made me experience not only the fusion of minds and bodies in darkness, but he also taught me the arts that could be enjoyed in the light of the lamp. I knew that in his words, facial expressions, his style, his action and skill, the kind of total commitment and immersion that Maruta was capable of, was wholly absent. Instead of total, almost mindless fusion, he taught me the possibility of enjoying, mentally at a distance, and almost from the outside, as it were, the endless skill and creativity available during sex experience between a man and a woman. There were moments when I would get angry with him as a simple lecher. But that handsome fellow's lechery would transport me beyond the mountain peaks, into the skies above them. This lord of the Devas recognized no distinction between day and night — it was all the same. He would force me to drink the intoxicating liquor made from a tree, which his body-guards supplied. He would himself dance in the style of his folk and urge me to dance. He would win me over by flattery,

saying, ‘Beloved, I am your slave.’ He would sometimes forcibly pull me out for roaming on the shoulders of the hills.

"Who would count the days he was with us? Certainly not I. Of course, Pandu and Madri did keep account! When the mountain valleys were dried up, those were days I felt like oozing juices, my body light as a flower. He never again asked me to be his wife. He never pushed me into emotional dilemmas. He did not drive me into any moral dilemmas by asking me to go with him. He made me so happy that I did not find it necessary to postpone telling the king about my conception to prolong our mutual joy. No, as soon as Pandu mentioned the limit of his Niyoga period, he called it a day, cheerfully taking leave of everybody. He had a fully contented face, when he told Pandu, ‘King Pandu, Indra’s son shall be your son. Remember, no matter who is Indra at the moment, the entire Deva army will be ready to fight in your cause.’ Then he embraced Pandu in a friendly fashion, and departed.

"My son, the offspring of the union between me and Indra, had the same form and appearance as Indra. Sharp eyes. Blue eyes. Pointed nose, chin and face. The same nature, too — all alertness, sharpness, action, bonhomie, and love of pleasure. Kunti’s womb has never betrayed the seed, never conceived against the seed sown. As soon as the baby was out, I knew it immediately. He couldn’t be anyone but Indra’s son. Those blue eyes were enough to give away his father’s identity. Who wouldn’t desire to take that child into his or her arms? By that time Madri’s jealousy had grown sizeable. She was even eager to get hold of him, embrace him and kiss him and fondle him as if he were the fruit of her own flesh. Of course, her jealousy was natural and understandable. All these days I had not taken any serious trouble to fathom her mind. Dharma was born because of Pandu’s desire, and Maruta was invited at his request. Even Indra wanted only me, none else. Then how can I be blamed? True I had enjoyed the experience thrice. Thrice I greened with conception. Meanwhile, Madri, normally slim, began to shrink into an even thinner figure. One day I overheard her asking the king, ‘King, we now have three sons. Elder sister has strained to bear all the three. Having married you,. I shall be content if I, too, can suffer a similar strain. My menstruation all these days has gone to waste. At least once…’

"I felt genuinely sorry for her. The king asked me about it, as I was the mistress of the household. I simply said, ‘yes’, but let it happen soon. The question then was: who should be chosen to grant her motherhood? By that time, the king had developed great attachment to the two Deva doctors. I believe that the king had started showing signs of restored virility. That was enough for him to hail the doctors as great persons. When they visited us next, he requested one of

them to help in Niyoga. He replied, ‘King, we are twins. We do no t practise medicine singly. Since you are requesting me to assist you in the role of doctors, we shall also both participate simultaneously in offering our gift.’

’The king consulted me. It did not occur to me that it would be wrong. Among the Deva clans, all men participate as brothers. I knew that the brothers in the Deva villages in our valley enjoyed common wives. In any case, these doctors were twins. Madri grinned. On Pandu’s behalf I got her to make the usual promise. Madri who had been drying up all these days became now wet, watered, and sprouted. Her face began to shine with new life and gentleness. A very attractive woman whom I felt like embracing and kissing fervently. At this time, Dharma was six, Bhima four, and Arjuna, two. Madri’s belly began to swell monstrously, out of all proportion to her size. I was crazy for children, and would not have minded bearing more children. Not grown up children, but fresh, flesh-and-bone toys, living toys! I was looking forward to the arrival of the child gestating in Madri’s belly. I was in charge of the delivery. I was joyous. She had twin sons. They made the king’s lineage branch out in five directions.

Madri confessed, ‘Sister, I am disappointed that these are sons. I was yearning for a daughter.’

"Was it because two males sowed their seeds that she conceived twins? I do not think so. It cannot be. In the nearby Deva villages, multiplicity of husbands did not produce twins. Among Deva women, too, in spite many husbands and many wives, the rule was one child. Twins were rare. The fact that Madri bore twins made me jealous of her. I became alert to future possibilities. She got two sons aF one stroke. Was her belly more capacious than mine? More fertile her womb than mine? Suppose she got a second chance and produced another pair. My three against her four. I would be overtaken. Even if she delivered one child second time, she would have three. And equal to mine. So I said to the king, ‘After Bhima’s birth I was not really keen on Niyoga. You forced me the third time in order to strengthen bonds of friendship with the Deva people. That was how I bore Indra’s child. Now Madri, too, has two. You should not permit her to have any more children even if she openly asks for it. It would amount to a gross violation of Dharma. Of course, if you regained your potency, that is a different matter. In that .case, both of us may be fortunate enough not to waste our menstruations.’

"The king not only agreed with this argument, he was even appreciative of it.

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Chapter

10

"WE had been away from Hastinavati for nine years. There in the capital of the kingdom, Gandhari bore child after child to blind Dhritarashtra. Now I realised that Indra's arguments were not simply a trick to get me. I became increasingly certain that our children here and Gandhari's children there were growing up to wage eventually a war over the kingdom. Suppose we had returned even at this point? Of course, it would have been the wisest thing to do. I urged the king to return. He would not listen to me. The medicine had produced some positive improvement, he said. He asked, why go now without complete cure. One day I pointed out to him that we had five sons. He replied, 'Yes, there are five. What loss is there if we have five more?' Though he did not say it, I sensed that the children to come, mentioned by him, were to be his own, not born from Niyoga. I did not feel like hurting him by continuing the debate. After all, I and Madri had enjoyed even if only through Niyoga. Who knows the agonies he must have undergone mentally! I, too, prayed that he should recover his reproductive potency. But, as a matter of fact, his strength was ebbing away. In that mountainous land, the ground was full of ups and downs, no level ground at all. Pandu got tired, his breathing becoming hard, if he moved in that land.

"Now I had five sons. Madri's children, Nakula and Sahadeva, were deeply attached to me, mostly resting on my lap. Mine were the thighs that gave them warmth as they dozed off. They were handsome like their father, but somewhat small and delicate in frame. Peaceful kids, like Dharma rather than Bhima who was rough and noisy. They wouldn't kick with their legs, like Bhima. Not that they were inactive. Full of gentle smile. In moving their limbs they seemed to take care that the motion of their legs and hands did not hurt me, their elder mother.

"As years passed, the number of servants available got reduced. Some beat a retreat unable to stand the cold and the boredom of this place. More recently, the supply of provisions had become inadequate, reduced in quantity. Almost unnoticed, the responsibility of bringing up the children fell to my lot. Madri devoted herself to looking after the sick husband. The king felt vaguely uneasy if I

attended to him. His face displaying hope, desire, helplessness, and body already obese at thirty-three or thirty-four. Though forty-six or forty-seven years had elapsed, the face appeared to me now clear in the water. He had sentenced himself to death. But this Kunti, immersed in the responsibility of rearing the children, could not see it at the time." Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of steps behind. She turned behind. It was Vidura approaching her, descending the steps. He asked her, "Have you been sitting here all this time?" She shook her head answering by a sign. Moving closer and sitting near her, Vidura asked again, "What are you thinking about?"

Kunti, "He said they are not Pandavas. How could he say it?"

Vidura, "Mere thinking won't solve this issue."

She also felt the same way. She asked, "Bhishma had sent for you. What did he have to say?"

Vidura, "He, too, was miserable, worried to death. Afraid whether the world would continue if the ancient Dharma were violated. But there was only worry and fear, but no solution. I said, 'come let's go, you, teachers Kripa and Drona, and I, to Duryodhana, and teach him Dharma. Tell him, if you utter such words, thinking that Pandavas are not Pandavas, we shall all quit this town, and join the Pandavas'.

Kunti, "What did they say?"

Vidura, "They are in love with Hastinavati, it seemed to me."

Kunti, "Tell me, tell me, what did they say?"

Vidura, "No matter how strongly I pleaded with them for the ancient Dharma, their love for Duryodhana and his group is very powerful. I have been trying to solve this secret. Is it because they were Dhritarashtra's own sons? Of course, this is my own guess."

At least one foothold in Kunti's support appeared to have collapsed. She was unable to determine what was really in the minds of these old people. She had never directly confronted them. Right from the start of her life in Hastinavati, they inspired in her reverence and fear. But she was disturbed by the fact that they had the reputation of being totally committed to the ancient Dharma. Now she was not sure of her own position.

Vidura told Kunti, "Look, there is one another thing. You remember that your sons had requested Krishna to take you to them. But Krishna had to flee, escaping Duryodhana's attempt to capture him. Krishna has sent me the message that you should be sent to your sons in a separate chariot. His messenger brought me the message just now."

It was now four months past the thirteen years. She longed to see Draupadi and the sons. She felt that she should have gone with Krishna. Vidura said, "The sun is about to set. Come, let's go." As he rose, Kunti said, "You go. I shall follow after a while." After washing his feet and hands in the Ganga, he slowly climbed the steps and left. She knew that Bhishma had a soft corner in his heart for Duryodhana and his group. But the question was: Was it because they were Dhritarashtra's own sons, produced by him? This idea took hold of her. But she could not believe it. But Vidura never said anything without considerable and serious thinking. She thought for a while. Then the sun in the west, and her image in the wafer, became more indistinct in the dimming light. Yet if she focussed hard on it, the image appeared clear and sharp. She was turning eighty-one with her eye-sight weakened. She thought she would see nothing more. She was a widow at thirty-five. Saddled with five sons. Madri died earlier, perhaps to avoid seeing such things as were now happening." I wondered: 'Had she better understanding of things than I?' My anger rose against her, and against my husband. She was alone looking after our husband whose health was rapidly declining. He was uneasy when I tried to attend on him. Why? It became clear later. I was the mistress, in command of the household. Perhaps he was scared of me as a child would be scared of a terrifying mother. I did not know then. It was an afternoon, it was before I knew why he did not welcome my nursing him. It was when winter was tapering off. Yes, winter was on the way out. I saw Madri running to me, crying, 'Sister, sister.' My first reaction was that she must have been agitated by one of the children drowning or being mauled by a wild animal. I looked around the hut for signs of this. I saw Nakula and Sahadeva playing. Arjuna was aiming an arrow at a fruit on a tree. Dharma and Bhima had gone to the village near the stream. I knew because they had told me so. Uncomprehending and anxious, I asked her, 'What happened? What' Repeating 'King', sobbing, she pressed her face against my breasts. Even as I was asking her, I sensed the truth. Holding my hand she ran ahead. The slopes of the hills were still covered with snow. The water in the stream was slipping like viscous curds. In the path that had been cut, I followed her through its winding turns. After a while I saw King Pandu in the shade of a boulder burning in the sun. I saw him sprawling, face upwards, dead, quite dead. The face still showed traces of the excruciating pain that had twisted it and distorted it. When I asked her, how it had happened, she said, 'shortness of breath'. Then I asked her. Why she had walked him this far, she sobbed, uncontrollably. She shrieked loudly enough to reach the ears of the mountains on both sides. The cry I wanted to cry, did not come out, stuck in my throat. I touched the king's body all over - chest, hands, from head to feet. He wore to under-garments, I found. Appeared like one who had j::-» go' ready to bathe. Then I turned towards Madri. I understood in a flash. I said,

‘You wretch, you killer of husband. You killed him. Did , you walk him so far to kill him?’ I slapped her cheek hard. But I was hardly conscious of my own action. The fad of king’s death was pushed into the background when I found Madri falling unconscious, I got busy rubbing her body with my blanket, as also her face, palms and feet, to revive her consciousness. There was no question of my going out to call the servants, leaving the king’s corpse and Madri in that condition. If left, there was every chance that wolves, descending from the mountain to escape the severe cold, might eat them. All I knew to do then was to rub Madri’s body to produce warmth in it and to cover fully the frozen body of the king. She was still alive. Her lips were moving. She was muttering something as in a dream. I lifted her head and placed it on my lap. As if suckling her, I clasped her and warmed her. I whispered in her ear, ‘Madri, Madri, please, what happened! Forget it. Listen, the little ones are playing outside the hut. I have not informed the servants about anything.’ I didn’t know anything else to do.

"She regained her consciousness after a considerable time. She opened her eyes. She got up in spite of my urging her not to. She did not raise the bowed head. I told her, ‘I shall call the servants. Look after the king,’ and left there in a hurry. Instructing one servant to look after the children, I returned to the spot where Pandu lay dead, with two servants. By the time I reached the spot, my breathing became hard. Madri was sitting, with the dead king’s head on her lap. All her face was wet, though her eyes looked empty. The servants asked, ‘What happened?’ Madri made a sign to them not to ask.

"What next? Of course, the death rites. Yet it occurred to none then to do so. As for Madri, she appeared to be in some other world. J was scared by the idea that, if we cremated the dead body, then nothing would remain, nothing but emptiness. I sat immobile. The servants continued to stand and wait. I do not know after how long, I said, ‘One of you hurry up to the village near the pond and fetch Dharma and Bhima.’ The younger servant left immediately.

"The older servant advised, ‘Mother, what is the point of sitting like this silently? We must think of the next step. The corpse is freezing. It is winter, too.’ I simply stared into Madri’s face. She was still like a statue, unaffected by what was happening around her. I, too, sat still. In a short while, the younger servant returned with Dharma and Bhima. They were running literally. Dharma asked me, ‘Mother, what happened to father?’ Eight-year old Bhima, shaking Madri’s shoulders, asked, ‘Mother, father is said to have died. What does it mean, dying?’ By that time some eight or ten persons came from the village near the pond, all men and all running. Their wives, children and old persons followed them. They all gathered round the king’s dead body. Madri gently lifted the head of the king, and rested it on

the ground. By then already the neck had become too stiff to be moved. Madri came to me resolute and, holding my hand, said, ‘You carry on the further work. I shall embrace the corpse, burn with it, and depart.’

"I was dumb-founded, not quite understanding her. When I asked her what it was all about, she merely confirmed her decision. I tried to pacify her, ‘Are you angry and upset because I slapped you? What has happened has happened. If you do like this, what will be the fate of the children? Give me your support now, can’t you?’

"Madri did not change her decision. The servants, the villagers, and even Dharma and Bhima, embracing her hard, entreated her to give up the idea. I pleaded with her in utter humility, seating Nakula and Sahadeva on my lap, but she refused to budge even fractionally. I delayed the death rites, hopefully, but it was of no avail. The villagers carried the corpse to the hut where it was set down on a blanket warmly. I said the rites would be performed the next day. She was sitting behind the corpse. As the news spread, more people from the village turned up. They also pleaded with her. She didn’t deviate from her decision. She closed the door of the hut so that none could get in. We spent the night, I and she, with the corpse, with a small burning wick to keep us company.

"She was silent right up to mid-night, but suddenly burst with sobs, ‘Look, I am dying for sure. Have no doubt. Before that I want to confess everything to you. Anyway you have become a mother to my children. I know that you have great jealousy for me, not for my children. Didn’t you really want to bear yourself my children?’

"I was silent. I went on staring into her face. Without waiting for my reply, she continued, The king’s reproductive potency was recovered fully some five or six months back/But he was scared of you. Why? I don’t know. I, too, am scared of you. On the pretext of going for a walk, he would take me so far away from you. As for me, I was terribly hungry for it. Can you imagine the intensity of that hunger of the flesh for flesh? There is no more cruel punishment than to suffer it. That old man, Bhishma, tempting my parents with his military prowess and wealth, bough* -.le. He pushed me into this insatiable hunger and into the nuptial chamber, closing the door from the outside. I am sure the old man will end up in the worst hell after death, never go to heaven. Why should I curse him before I die? What was I saying?’ she paused as if trying to remember. But continued, ‘Yes, I had said 1, too, was scared of you. Yes, the king longed to ride your body, enjoy it. But he lacked the courage to approach you. He told me one day, ‘Kunti is a ravishing woman. Her sight turns me into her slave, quite defeated. I am not capable of riding her body. You are the one suited for me.’ The words were

enough to kill my jealousy for you. Yes, his words extinguished my jealousy. Are you listening?' Again she paused, stared hard into my face. I was sitting still, listening to her words. Then she proceeded, 'I said, hunger. These five or six months that I have been taking the king for walk. Yes, under the shade of rocks and trees. He used to excite me, turn me mad. Yet he did not possess full power. He would tire very easily and very fast. Then defeated he would sleep off to rest. I would plead with him, 'King, why such hurry? Let the medicines produce their full result. Let the semen secrete sufficiently.' No, he would have none of this. Half-satisfied, I would groan in acute agony. Do you know why he was not patient? He was in a desperate hurry to produce a child of his own. He was gripped by a deathly desire to produce a child of his own, seize it, embrace it, fondle it, kiss it, and enjoy bliss. I was greedy for a child to seed in me. I was jealous of you.' At this point an acute agony gripped me. I fainted. I rested my head on the corpse in front of me. It was icy, stone-cold stiff. The droning silence of the entire mountain range froze my vital nerves. After a short while, I recovered from fainting. Got up and sat there. All the time, Madri was watching me. She continued, 'Do you know what happened this afternoon? I was highly excited, my body on fire. He could not last very long, tired soon, utterly defeated. He had earlier excited me to a high pitch. Now he couldn't satisfy me. It was terribly cruel on me! I embraced him fiercely, held him in a vice-grip, so that he couldn't get away. I went on, provoking him, 'Come on, king, I want more, it isn't enough. Is this all the capacity you have?' I squeezed his shoulders. Kunti, do you remember my telling you back in Hastinavati about the skills in the bed our Madra women pass on from generation to generation? Well, I tried them all on him. Set him on fire. In the beginning he, too, found it cruel on him. But slowly he became excited, saying, 'Madri, Madri, because of you my potency has burst out, exploded. I had never felt this sense of power before.' He began to work on me vigorously. I was lost in the knowledge that he had at last become a fully functioning male, his illness cured and potency completely restored. I was rapturous. What bliss on his face, what flames of excitement lighted his face, he was mad with joy. I had reached at last the first step of happiness. But suddenly I saw his face become contorted, ugly. It was knotted all over with incredible pain. Then he reclined against my forehead. His voice became indistinct, and the words tangled. Then, then, his heart-beat stopped, still. But it took me some time to realise what had happened.'

"All of a sudden I had nothing but compassion for her. She looked more like a daughter of my own flesh, a luckless daughter. Going round the corpse, I went to her, sat by her. With both hands, I embraced her tightly. She was still, as if indifferent to my embrace, even against it. She was sitting motionless and lifeless like the corpse

in front. My eyes watered. Her eyes froze like the snows. I held her in embrace for quite some time. She lay in my arms like a lifeless, motionless log. I entreated her again to change her mind, 'Look, you can certainly die on your husband's funeral pyre. But you have yourself said that the king's potency had sprouted about five or six months back. In all these days, suppose you had conceived by chance or perhaps even today itself the seed might have stuck in your womb. If you die, then you will be guilty of killing a foetus. It is a grave sin. In the morning, we shall carry out the funeral rites.'

"Madri did not reply immediately. I felt hopeful. But soon after, she said, 'You remember, after Nakula and Sahadeva were born, my menstruation did not occur. I cannot make out whether I have conceived or not. Whatever happens, I have determined to die.'

'Suppose you have conceived.'

Madri, 'Even if I have conceived, it matters little. You know the story of our uncle Vicitraveerya, who was born to old, sickly Shantanu. Well, I do not want to give birth to the child of a sick man, and produce a child who may turn out to be physically handicapped or a coward. Enough for me that Nakula and Sahadeva are there, hale and healthy.'

"I didn't say anything. I was convinced in my heart that she would not yield on her decision. She spoke again, Tlease do not talk in such a way as to revive my greeds. You may ask me what I would have achieved by dying this way. Tell me, what point is there in living now. All these years I lived like a widow, suppressing all desires. Future will be the same. We have to return to Hastinavati, don't we? They will consign me to living death by accusing me day in and day out, that I was killer of my husband.'

"Yes, Madri went away, gone from this world. One clan of Devas who had come down for the winter, heard the news, and gathered there. People came from the villages near the local ponds. A big crowd gathered. The sobbing children were left behind with the servants. Madri climbed the pyre. She lay embracing the corpse. I shouted one last, desperate shout, 'Madri, Madri, please, rise and come away/1 shouted again but all that happened was that Madri was burning alive, undergoing hell. She groaned. She screamed. But she did not come out of it. She left, leaving me all the mess of living.

"Yes, I was left with all the worries and problems, after she was gone. I returned to Hastinavati, whether bearing these burdens or creating them. As they heard about the king's death, all the Deva kin came down. All of them, Dharmadhikari, Maruttha, Indra and the doctor twins. All the four pleaded, 'Pritha, why do you want to go back? These are our children, and you, our wife. Be one of us, a

member of the Deva people. These children will become Deva children.' Maruttha held Bhima in a tight embrace. Indra, too, was infatuated with Arjuna. These doctor twins had deep affection for Nakula and Sahadeva. Well I refused the offer, forgetting the experience of my thirty-five years, refused the joy of living in the Deva land without widowhood; but accepting Hastinavati's widowhood, sacrificing myself. I came down, with children, climbing down the mountains and hills, as the servants carried Nakula and Sahadeva by turns. I came down here to Hastinavati to rot. Bhishma then embraced his five grand-children. How could he now discriminate against them?" Kunti sighed. Darkness was everywhere, and the only sound was the sound of the river water. The river was audible, not visible. She sat, eyes open. After some time, Vidura called from above. She got up, and slowly climbed the steps built of lime and mortar. From the house above wafted the smell of the ritual fire and ghee.

She sat with Vidura for the meal. It was rice cooked soft in milk. She drank it up from the wood vessel. Eating with her were Vidura and his sick wife. His children and grand-children were out in the garden, or up on the terrace. Kunti remembered. She had to get up early next day. She had to meet Karna before sun- rise when he came down to the river. She was sad. Felt as if a thorn had pierced her. After the meal, she came out to squat on the lime-mortar step outside. Soon Vidura joined her there. For a while they sat silently. It was always the same, right from the beginning. They both had silence, wordless silence as their only companion. After a long time, Vidura said, "Kunti, don't you want to go to bed?"

Kunti, "I shall sleep. But there is one thing. At that time this very Bhishma had said that there should be no quarrel, and got my sons that Khandavaprastha. The original capital, Hastinavati, remained with Duryodhana. Now, please send my sons a message, the message that Kunti has returned to Hastinavati. She will not stir from there. They must fight and win Hastinavati. And the coronation must be celebrated in Hastinavati."

Vidura was nonplussed. He said, "What is this you are saying?"

Kunti, "My husband was coronated earlier than that blind fellow, wasn't he? Is not Dharma two years older than Duryodhana? Only my sons should reign in the original capital. What I am saying are words of Dharma. Send them a messenger who can grasp this message, and then convey it to them in no uncertain terms. Let my sons come to see me here with their victorious army after defeating the enemies of Dharma. I shall not stir out from here till then."

Vidura, "Suppose by chance a peace treaty emerges?"

Kunti, "Then let Duryodhana go to Indraprastha."

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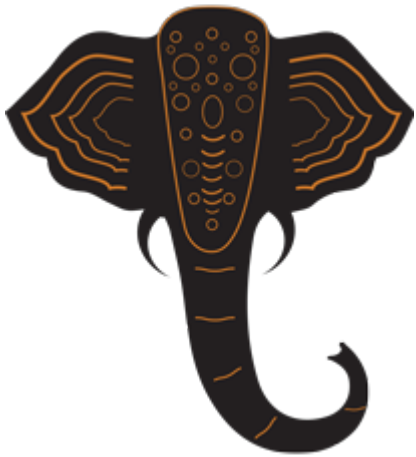
PART THREE



Chapter

11

KRISHNA, too, was camping in Upaplavya city. It was the centre of the war efforts of the Pandavas. It was, by no means, a small town. But it was not also very large. In fact, not even half as large as the capital of Virata kingdom, the Virata city. The king of Virata had left it for his newly acquired kin through marriage, so that they had a place for planning and preparing for the expected war. He had got enough houses vacated to accommodate not only Pandavas but also the kings invited to join them in the war.

Unable to stand the burning noon heat, Bhima slept on the cool mortar floor. The windows were covered with hanging carpets woven out of Lāmanca roots. Servants were continuously pouring water on them to cool the air. Bhima was actually half asleep. No doubt he had decided not to eat too much but how could one resist the temptation to overeat when one had before one such tasty dishes as Karambha and the mutton? As usual, that day, too, Bhima's belly was overful. On top of it, there was this oppressive sultriness. The suffering would be for a short time longer, and then the sun would go down, and a breeze would blow. The heat would reduce. He thought to himself—Tt is better under the tree outside than here under the cool of the Lamanca mat.' With such thoughts, he was rolling to one side when a servant came in and announced, "King Yadava Krishna has arrived."

Bhima sat up. Though a wooden seat covered with silk cloth was pushed before him for sitting, Krishna preferred to sit on the bare mortar floor next to Bhima, perhaps because it felt cooler. Bhima knew very well why Krishna had arrived there. This knowledge revived the mental turmoil within, which had earlier subsided a little. Setting aside his upper garment, and wiping away the sweat on his neck and chest, Krishna said, "After all, the cows from the Matsya country are of quality breed. The thickness of their milk can be found only in the milk of our Mathura cows. That is why one never gets tired of eating Karambha. Isn't it true?"

Bhima didn't say anything. Krishna divined his inner feelings by looking at his face. He repeated the question to Bhima, "Isn't it true?"

Bhima, "I have no idea of the taste of your Mathura cow milk. I can, however, assure you that the milk given by these Virata cows is fantastic. If the cows graze the lush, green grass on the hill slopes, then they can give rich milk. But the cattle get tired because of their climb up and down the hills, and they tend to yield less quantity. It could be because the water in the body goes out as sweat, and thus the quantity is reduced."

Krishna, "Bravo, Bhima! I do not possess the knowledge about cows that you seem to possess." Krishna moved closer to Bhima and appreciatively fondled his shoulder.

Bhima, "Krishna, as you say, lam more expert in eating items like cows' milk, curd, ghee and so on, than you. I do not think that you are praising me without meaning it. I also know that you have come here now for something more important than merely praising. I suspect that you have come here to persuade me to sacrifice my siesta and then accompany you, and your praise of me is meant to do just this. You see, large-bodied persons like me sweat a lot. In a way persons like you are better off." Fanning himself with a fan made of Lamanca roots, four times rapidly, he said, "The riding-horses, too, do not get tired."

Krishna, "You are waving the fan to cool only yourself! Please, see that the breeze blows my way a little." Then he positioned his chest towards Bhima's fan. Feeling the relief, he said, "You said you are to accompany me there. Well, where is this there? Tell me frankly. After all, she is your first wife. She is the one who won your tender heart. You feel too shy even to mention her name. Filled with love within, why pretend stubbornly to be innocent?"

This enraged Bhima. He was so angry that, had it been anyone else other than Krishna, he would have thrashed him twice. Restraining himself, he said, "I am fifty-three or fifty-four, and if mother were here she would have given a more accurate figure. Moreover there has been sexual abstinence forced by twelve years of exile in forest. Also one year of servitude in incognito. There is now no room for women and love in me."

Krishna, "Of course, I know that you never desire other women. But the one I am referring to is a wife whom you have passionately loved and married. So how does she count?"

Bhima, "No, that's not what I am saying. It is true that this Bhima is past fifty and starved in the forest for twelve years, but the power of his arms has not decreased. He is a son of Pritha; Born to her of a Deva army chief, and he can beat any enemy army. When he is there, why should you go round begging for support? Bhima and beggary do not mix. I shall not go on a begging mission. Talk of something

else, please."

Krishna, "How can inviting alliances for war be regarded as beggary? We have sent such missions to several kings. Duryodhana has also been sending them. Can all that be called begging? Moreover, when even other friendly rulers are supporting us, should not a son, a powerful son, you have created, not come to our aid? But how can he come unless he is aware of the situation? It is your task to go and inform him. And, of course, you will have a chance to look up your wife."

Krishna spoke in a grave but intimate tone. Bhima's face, normally red, turned redder. Dumb-struck, he began to stare down at the fan. At the edge of the wall, a large summer fly repeated its motion of hitting the wall and flying away from it. After a while, Krishna continued, "After marriage, you did not visit them even once. You did not fondle and bring up the child. You never set your eyes on your wife. Therefore, it is natural that you should ask: With what straight face can I go and request him to join us with his Raksasa army'? In the first place, you should know that everybody is bound by the norms and rules of the caste-community to which he or she belongs. Aren't there communities in which the father has no responsibility for nurturing the children, which falls entirely to the lot of the mother? In such groups, one never asks a father why he neglected one's upbringing. It is even likely that she may not complain that you never returned to her. In any case, all of your time was spent in exile and servitude. Where was the question of your bringing her? If you explain, won't she understand? I can ' understand your embarrassment."

Krishna stopped his speech at this point. Bhima was able to think of an immediate response. "Of course, you can read - everybody's mind. You are such a clever person!" There was anger, not only in the voice, but also in the face, eyes and nose. The right hand which was holding the fan at rest now suddenly began fanning rapidly. The consequent stir in the air upset the rhythm of the motion of the summer fly. Krishna continued a little longer his silence. Then he spoke very slowly, "The prowess of arms is useful only in a single-handed combat. You must remember that Duryodhana is not stupid like Jarasandha. Suppose you were to challenge him to fight you single-handed, and say that the fight would decide who should get the kingdom, Duryodhana will certainly not be foolish enough to accept it. Even the wealth you had stored in Indraprastha is now a part of his treasury. This means he will have behind him more kings, a larger army, more chariots, more horses and elephants. Against all this, of what use is the power of your arms alone? You should not hesitate to accept soldiers to join your side, no matter where they come from. One more thing you must keep in mind." At that point,

Bhima's right hand stopped fanning, and his eyes, so far looking down at the ground, now were raised to meet Krishna's eyes. Krishna continued relentlessly, "Remember that Duryodhana is sending emissaries to negotiate alliance with the Raksasas, the groups to which belonged the Raksasas you slew - Hidimba, Baka, Kimmeera and others. Don't you think that they are just waiting to get a chance to avenge the death of these Raksasas? In warfare, the Raksasas have a distinct style of their own. You, too, know it. They rush in the darkness of the night and keep fighting. Moreover, can our Aryan folk match their bravery in overpowering the enemy without regard for their own life ? What could you by yourself do if we do not have at least some Raksasa support to counter Duryodhana's Raksasa supporters?"

Bhima's eyes met Krishna's eyes, trying to size them up. The summer fly was no longer near the wall. Bhima did not bother to turn his neck to see which way the fly had flown. Outside, the servants were busy pouring water over the Lamanca mats to soak them. Bhima was saying to himself— "This is not a bad town, and there is plenty of water even in summer." Krishna interrupted his thought by saying, 'Tell me. Who is better qualified than you to approach the Raksasa leader, Ghatotkacha?"

Far a way, the silence was disturbed by the sound of clanging. It was the sort of sound produced by a hammer hitting an anvil. At hat time the trees and plants made noise as the wind blew, no, as a tempest broke out... A dusty storm rose, the wind reaching the sky to bring down the pervasive heat. But the wet Lamanca mats were impervious to dust. Dust, therefore, wouldn't bother the sweat-soaked body. Bhima remembered — twelve years in forest, no not fully twelve, four years in the Himalayas between, and those eight years, eight summers when he had to suffer the hell of dust-bath, and yet after the dust storm subsided there was the heavenly bathing in a stream or pond. Getting up, he said, "Krishna, let's get out. The storm is so beautiful to watch." Bhima stood up to go, and Krishna followed suit. The wind blew with terrific speed. The trees and vegetation in the surrounding forests swayed, trembled and shook. The bamboo branches bent full circle. As dry bamboo trunks were forced to rub each other, they produced forest-fire. The flames were spread by the wild wind. Yet it wasn't the dust that covered the sky. But in this Upaplavya town itself, dust had pervaded all space, covering everything like snow. Leaves and dried twigs rose and fell, caught in the wind. They would scatter and fall to the ground. Standing on a platform in the courtyard, Krishna and Bhima watched the scene. Krishna came up to the height of Bhima's shoulders. Krishna could reach Bhima's height only if he raised his hand fully. Bhima was watching the storm fully absorbed. Krishna, too, gradually became absorbed in the scene. The scene revived in his mind memories of

watching tempests in Mathura- Brindavan, way back in his boyhood. The clanging sound could be heard even during the storm. In less than an hour, the storm subsided and the wind became calm. What followed was a gentle and cool breeze. All of a sudden Bhima became enthusiastic. By that time Krishna had returned to his residence. Alone, Bhima walked to the pond behind the town. Into the pond set amidst trees and built of stones, Bhima plunged. He Swam for a while, but the pond was not wide enough. He felt that the river Ganga was best for swimming. That reminded him of Hastinavati, of the river whose banks were fringed by a dense growth of the white Sütangi shrubs. Its water was cool even in summer. It was so close to Gangadwara, which could be reached by a day's walk, and waters flowed into Gangadwara from the snows melting in the Himalayas. It was an area where cold did not disappear even during summer. But how was the river Yamuna near Indraprastha? Somehow Yamuna failed to inspire the love Ganga could. He felt that no waters could create the kind of emotional attachment produced by the waters in which one had played as a young boy. Wasn't it there that the blind man's son made him eat a poisoned sweet-meat ball so that he would drown and die? But how can the river be blamed for this? Saying to himself that he loved Ganga more, he lay down, face up and began to spit the water from his lips like a jet. This made him feel good. The water-filled eyes could not focus clearly as if they had been smeared with oil. As a boy he had enjoyed better diving into the water and leaping backward and forward in the water than swimming in it. Then the other swimmers with him found themselves caught up in the splash created by his leaps, water forced into their mouths, and were driven by its force. This used to make him laugh, and then he would step out. But now he had no inclination to play these boyhood games. He was fully content with smooth swimming and floating calmly in the waters. His head touched the bank of the pond. A sense of contempt for it rose in him as he cursed it, "Damn it, it's such a small thing, one can only bathe, never swim in it!"Then he came out of it. He dried himself on the bank exposing his body to the wind. After that he put his clothes on and walked home. Now he found the heat more tolerable, and the body felt lighter. The sky no longer burned, as it was the time for the sun to sink.

As soon as he reached home, a servant gave the message, "The chief queen has arrived, and is waiting for you on the terrace in the cool air."

Bhima climbed the steps straight-away to reach the terrace. He thought, "Draupadi has come at the right time, and I can unburden my mind to her." The two servant-maids with her stood up as he approached Draupadi. Then immediately they left, climbing down the steps. Draupadi who was squatting on the soft mat made of the Jondu grass, stood up, came closer to her husband, took his hand in

hers. The sky above was a limitless expanse of copper colour. Draupadi's face, relatively darker than an average Aryan face, looked now even darker with some worry. The white strands that showed in her hair gave her a look of maturity. Bhima gazed at her face which came up to the height of his chest, and said, "Krishne, I had never seen you with so many white hairs."

Half peevish, and half-jocular, she replied, "Well, now you are seeing them. Shall I get you a young princess with dazzlingly black hair as a bride?"

Bhima sat down and made her sit down close to him. She sat still, and he looked up at the sky. After a very brief pause, he suddenly burst out, "I had gone down to swim. You have seen it, the small pond. It reminded me of Ganga, our river. Then I decided hereafter this Bhima will swim only in Ganga, and never in Yamuna."

Panchali was silent. When he was in this sort of mood, he always found her the ideal person to talk to. He never could unburden the secrets of his bosom, his dreams, to Arjuna. This was because they had different kinds of dreams and outlooks. Brother Dharmaraja was a senior. In the early days, he could be intimate with him, but later when he was coronated in Indraprastha Dharmaraja had acquired royal aloofness, kingly stiffness. But Bhima never lost his boyishness, his penchant for practical jokes, his sense of daring. As the eldest brother, after a successful Rajasuya ceremony, was fool enough to lose in a game of dice everything and force his wife and brothers into exile. Bhima was angry enough to want to burn Dharma's hands in fire. He had said so much, and would have carried it out, too, if Arjuna had not intervened. During the twelve-year exile, intermittently his rage against Dharma would flash. But only earlier when Dharma reigned in Indraprastha, the brothers were able to work out a stable relationship. But after Dharma had played and lost the game of dice, Bhima had developed a contemptuous attitude towards him, and this had not only snapped their relations, but had also prevented any kind of friendship between them. As for Nakula and Sahadeva, no matter how informal and friendly he tried to be with them, they, on their part, continued to be deferential and awed. The result was that he had none but Panchali to share his dreams with him, none but her to relax with. Of course, none of her husbands excepting Bhima could refer to her as Krishne, Draupadi's natal name.

Bhima, "Didn't you hear what I said?"

Draupadi, "Isn't the decision of the eldest brother final? It seems the king wanted Krishna to go out as an ambassador of peace."

Bhima, "Krishna may go, but I am absolutely certain that no peace

will come out of his negotiations."

Draupadi, "Suppose the old men persuaded Duryodhana to see reason. Then what?"

Bhima, "Sure, the old men will take the trouble to advise Duryodhana. Equally certainly he will not listen to them. None can understand better the working of his evil mind than I. Have you ever seen rival elephants, poised to fight? Well, the two opposing animals know each other's mind far better than any third party. The only difficulty is that one cannot compare him to an elephant. He is more like a dog, at the most!"

Draupadi, "Don't forget that even a dog frightened by an elephant may agree to peace."

Bhima said, "Krishne, look here, "as if he wanted to show her the secrets of his chest, he made a gesture and then continued, "Dharmaraja still hankers after the kingdom. He has his sights set on kingship. Similarly Arjuna also is keen on it. Perhaps also Nakula and Sahadeva. As for me, what is the point of going back to the palace after twelve years in the forest, feeding on roots and fruits, and hunted animals, and after a year of servitude in a stranger's kitchen, during the best years of one's life? For me, it makes no difference, whether forest or palace! In fact, I have even developed quite a love for forest life! I have but just one goal, one passion in life — to wipe out from the face of this earth Duryodhana, Dussasana, Karna and Sakuni, and the entire Kaurava breed, and the blind fellow who had fathered them. They had humiliated me alive, provoked me in the dice-assembly, insulted my wife as if she were a servant—yes, I live only to avenge all this. Even if a peace is made, and we get back Indraprastha, I shall be the army chief. Even after peace, I shall invade them and slay them all. That shall be my peace. I have never put these things so clearly and strongly to anyone as I am now to you. I am sure Duryodhana knows this. He is not such a fool as to miss this. Doesn't the dog know how to sniff at things?"

Draupadi began to look into his eyes with concentration. Even now her eyes were like lotus blossoms. Bhima stared back at her eyes. In the silence between the two their minds had merged, and they both knew this. All of a sudden, tears brimmed her eyes. Bhima realised that she would next break into a loud sobbing. But she controlled herself. And this anguished him. He said, "Krishne, if you cry, I too shall cry like a woman. But if you contain your feelings and suppress your cry, I shall get angry. With me, you should have no sense of pride."

Now she couldn't control herself. She herself opened the flood-gates of her tears. Moving closer, she rested her head on his lap, and

began to sob freely. Bhima clasped her as if she were a child. She started mumbling indistinctly, "If not with you, where else can I sob?" Gasping his thighs with her arms, she looked up into his face, and saw his eyes overflowing with tears. She knew they would be full of tears. But she said, "Bhima, it is unbecoming of a man to shed tears like this. If one tear falls by accident, then it is equal to the very Ganga itself. I know how much tear has flown out of your eyes on my account. From other eyes not even a drop will fall." Saying this to herself, she wiped the tears in his eyes with the end of her saree. This gave her a sense of relief. He stood silent. The evening had turned into night, and the stars were barely visible through the dusty air.

Krishne was struggling hard to say something. Bhima couldn't make any sense out of it. As he watched her indistinct face in the darkness, Bhima's eyes saw the white beard of Duryodhana's blind father, at least that was how the beard looked thirteen years ago. But how did it look now? He began to muse.

Draupadi, "Is it true you are going there?"

He, "Where?"

She, "To ask for the support of the Raksasa army."

Bhima, "It was Krishna's suggestion. I thought he was right in making it." His mind was still searching for a clear picture of the white beard which he had last seen thirteen and half years ago.

Fondling his arms gently, she said, "Can't this Bhima win without the assistance of that army?"

Bhima, "Our enemy Duryodhana is believed to have collected a large number of Raksasas behind him. We shall be severe! handicapped if we do not have a matching counter-force on our side. Hence Krishna's thinking is right. Moreover my son— let him come to his father's aid."

Draupadi fell silent again. After a while, he asked her, "Isn't that true?" Her reply was yes. He could detect a heaviness in her voice. Shaking her shoulders, he asked, "Why this sorrow?" Her response was a loud laughter, followed by the words, "No, I have no sorrow." But Bhima knew that this was not a genuine response. It was put on. So he continued, "Krishne, tell me what is eating you. Tell me quickly. Or else I shall get angry. Please don't let this happen." She could sense his anger not only from his voice but also from the tightness of the grip of his fingers over her shoulders.

Draupadi, "You know that I consider you as my only sheet-anchor. It is enough if you always bear this in mind."

Bhima, "What do you mean by saying this?"

She, "If you cannot understand it, it cannot be explicitly stated. So please don't demand it. And I am not prepared to let my throat go dry in answering it." Having made such a blunt statement, she sat down.

Bhima fell into deep thinking. No solution flashed. He was angry after a brief wrestling with himself. He asked her, "Look, this is a time of war. I have no time for answering a woman's riddles! Hurry up, and explain. Right?" He squeezed hard her shoulders while saying this.

Her shoulders had become tough after being squeezed strongly by his hands. By that time, she had made up her mind. Accordingly her reply was sharp and rough, "Yes, it is for you to understand. I refuse to explain. I know what you will say next when your anger increases. If you do what I think you will, your fame will be not that you smashed your enemy's bones but that you smashed your wife's bones! He couldn't do the former, and so he did the latter! I am warning you."

This enraged him further, the rage because she seldom spoke straight. Always in riddles. Always torturing him. What sort of wife was she? He felt like hurling abuses at her. But he was aware that she had already replied in anticipation of his expected but undelivered abuses! He felt helpless, but the question whether that blind old fellow's white beard would remain the same after thirteen and half years or not, still haunted him. He remembered how, after they returned home from the mountains, "having lost both father and his stepmother, and remembered how their bodies had been cremated, aftd how on reaching Hastinavati he had grasped hard the feet of the blind fellow considering him as his father. Now he gnashed his teeth and said to himself, "The blind fellow, the blind fellow, I shall take his eyes out inside the palace as he wouldn't be out in the battle- field." Just then Draupadi stood up. He asked, "Why did you get up?"

She, "To go to my camping place."

He, "Stay on here."

She did not say a thing. But he pulled her hand and made her sit down. She sat down, silent and submissive.

"Why?"

"We need not go back to that matter, and it has been thirteen and half years since then." Draupadi asked.

He, "That old scheme of regulated sharing of time does not hold now."

She, "Yes, it's now not in force. Now we have to reschedule as to who should have me when and for what time. In my case there is no

point now in doing it as I am now almost on the point of menopause."

He, "Well, after the end of the period of servitude in incognito, you have been living with Dharmaraja. Haven't you?"

She, "Yes, you can say it in a way. You know he has been right from the start indifferent to this matter. Yet one must follow the regulation strictly, you see. Bhima is prohibited from it for six months now, and also Krishne." She laughed but more in regret. Bhima did not laugh. After a while he passed his hands gently over her rich hair. Then he said, "Now you can go. Are the servant-maids waiting for you below?"

It was a town in which houses were built in circles, and hence were not easy to penetrate by robbers or enemies. Yet Bhima walked her and her servants to where she was camping, a house three houses away from his own camp.

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Chapter

12

HE was adamant that he would journey alone, and took with him only two persons who were experts on the teiTain and some twenty horsemen. But Dharmaraja, Arjuna, Krishna, and Draupadi, none, approved of it. The town of Upaplavya lay in the northern part of Matsya country. From there one could proceed to the Hidimba land via the Kuru land. The alternative route lay through the Panchala country. From the southern part of Kuru land, from Varanavatha, the Hidimba land was accessible by one night and one day's journey on foot. Bhima had a hazy memory of the route through a dense forest. In fact, it was not a path frequented by human travellers. It was the land the five Pandavas with their mother had roamed in order to save their very lives. The boundary of the Hidimba land had not been recognised by the neighbouring kings. It was such a dense forest land thatneither the Kurus nor the Panchalas, who ruled the adjacent territory, had been able to penetrate and conquer it fully. The forest was full of wild animals like the tiger and the panther, and no Aryan group had managed to settle there. This was for the obvious reason that the forest was difficult to clear for agricultural purpose. The Aryans could not live without cultivating the land. Only the Raksasas could survive and subsist on hunting, roots and bulbs, wild fruits, and naturally grown wild rice. Not only were non-Raksasas unable to survive there, but also no non-Raksasa group was allowed to live there by the Raksasas.

Dharmaraja, Arjuna and others had strictly warned Bhima to avoid the route through the Kuru land. They knew that Duryodhana was most wary of Bhima, his prime target. It was not merely natural to expect him to have him killed, but, in fact, attempts to kill him had been made earlier. If Bhima journeyed through his territory, Duryodhana would have grabbed it as an excellent opportunity to have him done away with. Therefore, they chose the more familiar route through Panchala. But Bhima was drawn to only one route, the route from Varanavatha, which took a full night and a full day. It was a route through very dense forest. Now he had ten horsemen in the front and ten horsemen in the rear, all fully armed to protect him. Then there were bags of rice and flour, and a vessel filled with ghee to provide material for cooking on the way. Also material to set up

temporary resting camp for him. How many years ago was it that he had gone there? Bhima wondered. And he remembered. Incognito servitude for one year and twelve years of exile, and the earlier years of ruling, living as beggars in Ekachakra city, six months in father-in-law, Drupada's house, one year with the Raksasa bride, Hidimbe, well, how many years did it amount to? Twenty-seven or twenty-eight? His arithmetic wasn't too sure. Any way it was a very long time ago. He mused, what a long time it had been, how many things had happened in the interval! Now he had ten armed bodyguards on horse in the vanguard and ten in the rear to protect him from Duryodhana's hired killers. Then, too, it was to hide from Duryodhana's hired assassins that they had to enter the forest, change their clothes, change their names. Bhima addressed an imaginary Duryodhana, "Duryodhana, I shall not call myself Bhima unless I behead you, divest you of your royal apparel, and wipe out your very name from human memory!"Then his mind turned towards his own name, its supreme prosperity, a marvellous name his parents had gifted him with. Even the just-born Bhima had been an unusually large baby, both in length and width. He could easily fill his mother's waist and arms. Even his mother, herself a large-bodied person, found it hard to carry him without her breath becoming short. Then his attention shifted to the horse he was riding. The horses were all of superior foreign breed, all males. Yet his horse was moving slowly with heavy steps. But then, during the exile, there was no horse. And, more important, no hope that one would survive the day. In sheer terror and to save their lives, all of them, Arjuna leading, he himself carrying his mother on his back in a piece of cloth folded to serve as a cradle, then followed Dharma, and last the twins, all of them had to rush through thick foliage and bushes. The air was so pregnant with the fear of death that a sudden brushing by the wings of a passing bird or the unexpected cry of some animal, scared them to death, their imagination concocting the presence somewhere around of their assassins. Bhima remembered how he himself had set fire to the wood house, forestalling the enemy's attempt to burn them all, by taking them unawares. They had even stuffed inflammable material, including ghee, in the house after secretly transporting them through a tunnel. Bhima remembered. The house went up in flames instantaneously, consuming in their fury the poor woman from the Bhil tribe and her five children. They must have perished within minutes, burnt to cinders. Duryodhana was jubilant that the burnt bodies were those of Kunti and her sons. He was ecstatic as he danced madly drunk with a mixture of the Soma juice, milk and honey. One should have seen his face when he discovered two years later that they were alive, and, worse, they were snatching away Draupadi in a Svayamvara ceremony! Had they coronated Dharmaraja as heir- apparent and entrusted him with the task of administration, he would have carried out his job so well as to evoke

the unqualified admiration of everybody — all the old folk, all the youth, and the entire population. Everything was fine with Dharmaraja, but why did he commit the folly of playing dice when he knew so little about the game? An excellent administrator, a wise person, a tolerant and peace-loving character. Bhima thought that the sense of power and the successful completion of the prestigious Rajasuya ritual, must have gone to his head, feeding his conceit. Even worse was his weakness for the old men, his habit of prostrating before them to please them, and to accept their words as purest wisdom. Bhima said to himself — "Even now he has it, and that is how the blind fellow managed to down us." The wily old, blind fellow rightly calculated that if Dharma's fame grew then the people might want to see him installed on the throne. He and his son hatched a conspiracy. What smooth words, butter soft words, and love-cozing throat! The cunning old, blind one had said, "My beloved son, Dharma! I am absolutely pleased with your devotion to duty displayed in carrying on the administration. But I am also worried that at such a young age, you have to shoulder such a heavy burden!"

Dharmaraja, "Father, this is your kingdom. I consider my work of administration as a way of serving at your feet."

Dhritarashtra, "The devotion you shower on elders will always be your protection. You are now tired of administrative work. You must take rest for a few days. Also there is a very grave issue that should concern you. Have you seen Varanavatha, one of our towns?"

Dharma, "No, father."

Father, "It is a place bordering on the territory of our enemies, the Panchalas. We have information that people in that area are not totally loyal to us. Don't you agree that people sandwiched between two countries tend to have divided loyalties? If a highly popular prince like you camps there for a year or two, preferably using it as a second capital city, establishing a reputation for just and efficient administration, then we can win over fully the people. That would also enable us to invade and conquer a bit of Panchala territory. Your revered father expanded our territory and became immortal. Shouldn't you continue his good work? Why are you silent, child? What do you think of my suggestion?"

Dharma, "Yes, father, what you suggest is right."

Father, "I have got built a whole new palace there so that you, your mother and brothers can live in comfort. Can an ordinary residence suffice for a Kuru prince? Absolutely brand new palace. Its colourful decoration is said to out-rival Indra's celestial capital, Amaravathi! Dharma, child, come hither." Then he embraced Dharma, and said, his sightless eyes flowing with tears, "But Gods have been so unkind

to me as they took away my sight even before I was born, and hence cannot enjoy seeing you all living together in joy! I yearn to go there with you all to taste the joys of perfumed flowers and the delectable smell of cattle. But this wretched attachment to Hastinavati comes in the way! Ever since I was born, I have never stirred beyond the bounds of this city."

Even Dharma was not blind to the blind man's motive. On returning he told us that his uncle was planning to alienate them from the affection and attention of the citizens, to cut off the roots of our popularity. But was that what the wicked and blind and old fellow had in mind? Bhima's mind began to explore the deeper motive. He had done this times without number, and he was convinced that Duryodhana was the architect of the whole design. Yet he was also convinced. Duryodhana's father was worse, more unscrupulous, more evil. But both Dharma and Arjuna, with their weakness for worshipping elders, didn't agree with him. When reverence for people increases, the capacity to see them in their true colours declined proportionately. Only Krishne agreed that the father was a greater evil than the son. Krishne was above blind reverence. Bhima's mind now became filled with memories of Krishne.

Krishne had said, "You are my only refuge." Before saying it, she had wept. Of course, she had said this umpteen times, but this time she had wept before saying it, wept in such a manner as to touch him in the depth of his heart. But she never explained, despite persistent questioning, why she had behaved in that way. He thought to himself, "What have I done that misleads her?" His horse slowed down. The horses in the front and the rear also were exhausted. They did not know exactly how far they had travelled. The Matsya terrain was hilly, full of hills that looked like burnt-balls of ash. The summer there was fierce. The horseman at the head of the party halted, and said, "King, after we pass this hump, there is a pond. Its waters are cool, surrounded by shady trees. The horses are tired, and let us rest for a while. We can leave after things cool down. I know this route well. We can have an enjoyable journey in the moonlight."

After the horses and men had drunk water to their fill, they started to cook their food, setting up a temporary oven. Bhima sat in the shade of a tree. A cool breeze blew, bringing solace to the aching limbs, more comfortable than the house covered with mats woven of Lamanca roots. Soon he lay down, face upwards. The leaves on the trees had gone dry and brittle in sun's summer furnace. His mind returned to the blind old man, and he asked the same question, "How would the old fellow's face now look after thirteen and half years? Would it now be bloated after sumptuous feasts in the palace? Or would it have become emaciated with the fear that the time had now arrived for Bhima to slay his son? Uncle Vidura told me later that the

old man's intention did not go beyond destroying Dharma's popularity. The plan to get built a lacquer palace in order to bum them alive, was entirely the son's. But couldn't uncle's understanding be wrong? Uncle and the blind fellow were very close to each other. Yes, they are also hostile to each other in some ways. It is a peculiar relationship compounded of love and hate. This messenger is a son of my mother's servant-maid. Yet he is angry that I don't listen to him, and, on the contrary, I render advice to him. But everybody respects him, servants, rural folk, messengers, farmers and merchants. I believe that he alone could console the old fellow, the blind fellow when he was mentally agitated. Right from his boyhood it was he who had looked after the blind man, helping him in several ways, in going to the toilette, in bathing, in eating, and generally in his movements. In the morning uncle would show him his low place as a messenger, but the very next day he would send for him, asking forgiveness, crying and sobbing helplessly. Were his tears then genuine or just false, ready to appear when needed? This uncle, too, is the same. Beat him, abuse him, he would never leave his master with his dog-like devotion. Strange, he calls Dhritarashtra a sinner and yet he refuses to keep away from the sinner! Of course, he himself commits no sin. What a strange attachment! By the time his thoughts had reached this point, he already had yawned the fifth or the sixth time. He closed his eyes. Though the shade of the tree was pleasant, sun's rays managed to pass through the space between leaves and pierce his eyes like needles of light. They worked on the eye-lids, and then heat the eyes beneath the lids, making them red. Once again the memory of everything burning, flames all over, consuming the entire wood house, fuelled by ghee, oil and dry wood pieces. A piercing cry of agony, and six bodies burnt to cinders, and also the corpse of the assassin, Purochana, hired by Duryodhana. Yes, he deserved to die, all right. But what justice was there in the death of the innocent woman and her five children? It was I, Bhima remembered, who calculated that Duryodhana, mistaking the dead bodies for those of Kunti and her sons, would attempt no more to kill them. Yes, it was to save our skin. Then Bhima felt the needles of sunlight torture him more intensely. He turned to one side, and closed his eyes. He felt guilty, saying to himself, to save our wretched lives we sacrifice anybody! He felt contempt for life itself. Well, he thought what was done was done, and the sacrifice already made. Why bother now? He yawned widely. Sleep took over. And then a nightmare, a nightmare in which was compressed the whole darkness of the past into a ball, thirteen and a half years, and before that, two years, and even earlier years. The muscles and nerves became suddenly unstuck, and then far away a horse's neighing and then the neighing of four, six and eight horses. He suddenly woke up, sweating and contemptuous of himself. Then he walked to the stream, and washed his neck, arms, arm-pits, chest, back, and thighs,

deliberately and slowly, with water scooped in his palms. Then as he drank ten handfuls of water he felt immense relief. But sweat drops began to appear soon after, and he wiped them with his upper garment. As he sat in the shade close-by, he remembered Krishne again. She said, "You are my only refuge, please keep this in mind. But what could she be meaning by this in that situation? I entreated her to explain the meaning. But Krishne is a great one for riddles. Never speaks straight. Who can fathom her inner mind? Is she exceptional in this or is this the normal way of all women? When I say, all women, I mean, of course, those I know — mother, in particular. But mother never speaks in riddles. Was she speaking in riddles with father? Perhaps. Who are the other women in our family? Yes, there is Subhadra. She is Arjuna's wife. He is not on terms of intimate speaking with her. The only woman I really know is Krishne. She is my whole conception of woman. She is a riddle, this woman, who is all women to me. Woman, your name is riddle! Riddle, your name is woman! Bhima woke up from his past or rather its memory, when the servant, Neela, announced, bending low, that the food was ready. Cooked rice, pancakes made of flour and caraway seeds, over-cooked meat, and what else? Beef, no less. Bhima was aware that they all knew his requirements. But he also knew that they did not know that raw beef tasted equally well. He said to himself, "If I eat raw flesh, people will brand me a non-Arya, Raksasa, as if the essence of Aryanism lies in cooked food!"That suddenly reminded him of Hidimbe, his Raksasa wife. She would gobble up raw meat. Bhima remembered, "I used to tempt her with cooked stuff by saying it had its own distinctive taste and flavour. She would enjoy it. Was it because she really liked it or because pretending to like it would please me ? But Hidimbe could never pretend with me; it was not in her nature; she was as straight as a bamboo shoot; straight in speech and behaviour. Her demands and wants were never couched in riddles. Uncle had arranged for our escape through the underground tunnel, and instructed us to cross the river in the boat of a particular boatman, waiting for us at the end of the tunnel in the centre of the thick forest. The boatman had warned us that we would be killed if we didn't hurry to cross the river. The whole of next day was spent in a forest of a wilderness we had not seen before nor expected to see in the future. Mother on my back, Arjuna in the front, and the rest behind. It was a problem to converse. So great was the lack of food and water. We had to go round but be careful not to be circling the same spot, wasting time. We fixed the directions correctly, and moved southward, to the river that marked the boundary of the Kuru country. That forest to the south of the river, what was its name? Yes, it was called Hidimbavana. It was not really its name, but that is how they called it. How could we risk sleeping in the night in that forest, when our bodies lay utterly lax and sleepy? I told them, you sleep, I shall keep vigil. With what speed they

quenched their thirst from the water flowing through the rocks, and then collapsed into a sleep like corpses, but for the fact that they were breathing all right. Their starved bodies were too weak even to produce loud snoring. But I was watchful, looking around for tigers and panthers. And then she materialised suddenly from nowhere! Her incredible height, taller than even an Aryan male, reaching upto my shoulders, body built like that of a cow, her waist covered with skin of some animal, was this illusion or reality? Yes, I can clearly recall it all. Then she vanished as I dozed off towards the dawn. Then she appeared again, came close to me and spoke. The Raksasa language she spoke is like our Aryan language, more like that of the Deva folk in the Himalayas. The same intonation, high-pitched voice. She asked in a high-pitched soprano, 'Who may you be? Why did you come to our forest?' I gave her a false name and a false identity. No sooner did I ask her who she was and why she was there in that dark night then, than she poured forth her answer immediately, 'My name is Salakatankati. We are Raksasas. My elder brother is the king of the Raksasa tribe here. I saw you by accident while on my night rounds. As soon as I saw you, I fell in love with you. I desired you. You are not like those fellows lying asleep on the ground. You are handsome like a Raksasas. Be my husband.' I was terribly sleepy after having roamed in the forest for two nights and a day. But this was an occasion that drove away my sleep of its own accord. In the spreading morning light, I could see clearly her splendid and lovely form, her magnificent height, and I was sure that God could not have created a better match for me. She was still very young, and I was how old? Twenty-five? For the first time my heart appeared to be on the point of collapse when she broached her desire. But I was really scared. Scared because of the unknown. I said to her, 'Lass, you, this, your forest, and your people, are all unknown to me. How can I trust you?'

She answered, 'Had I not desired you, would I have hidden between the branches, lost in watching you? I cannot endure the pangs of desire. Come closer. Your people will not wake up for quite a while.' She moved forward, spreading wide her arms as if to embrace me. Which Aryan woman would have done it, approaching me directly? In any case, who are the Aryan women I know? Draupadi married Dharma on the first day, and spent the night with him. The following day they let her ceremonially into my bed. All this time I was burning in my desire. After a year in Salakatankati's company, absence of women for a year and three months was a period of agonising hunger for a woman. Draupadi, though in height and build smaller than me, was a striking beauty with sharp features, who could attract the scion of any royal family assembled for the Svayamvara ceremony. Accustomed to Salakatanakati's direct and open approach in such matters, I went near Draupadi that first night

and spoke to her emotionally. Shrinking from me but unable to resist the power of my hand, she sobbed haltingly, but said bluntly, ‘You are so crude and rough. Your impatience is unworthy of an Arya.’ Ashamed of myself, I spent the whole night, sitting with my head bent. She was always full of riddles. She merely said this was how it should not be but not a word on how it should be! Except only once, on the day I presented her with a Saugandhika flower, obtained after an arduous search in the forest. Then she had said, ‘Bhima, what pleasure can a woman get if a husband mechanically does things after her detailed requests and demands! See, today I merely said to you, the Saugandhika flower has a fine aroma, have you seen it? That was enough. You understood my wish through that half hint, you scoured the entire forest tirelessly and brought it to me. How I wish you would understand as successfully now my unexpressed or half-expressed wishes and thoughts and intentions!’ Reading the riddles needs an ever-alert mind. Yesterday she said, ‘You also know that you are my only refuge. Let that be always in your mind.’ What can be its special meaning? She will never explain. It is not merely a question of the riddle. It is more importantly a question of self-pride, stemming from the pride that she wouldn’t care to explain if I did not care to understand! It was the same pride that prevented tears from welling up even when the situation demanded tears. One day she had said, 'Bhima, you are the only person in whose presence I weep freely without inhibition. If I shed even a single tear before any of the other four, I swear I am not a true daughter of King Drupada!’ When did she say this? I searched my memory. I could not immediately place it. Anyhow there was no doubt that sometime back in time our minds had fused through tears.

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Chapter

13

AFTER the meal, Neela unrolled a soft mattress for Bhima in the shade of a tree. The pillow was made up of an assortment of clothes bundled together. Bhima loosened up the knotted hair behind, and then stretched. No sooner did he lie down than he went to sleep. Neela knew that it was Bhima's daily habit to sleep for about half an hour after lunch in the afternoon. Neela and Bhima had known each other by now for about a year. After twelve years of exile, the five brothers and Draupadi went to Virata town to live out one year of incognito life. At that time Bhima had joined the royal kitchen as an assistant. Dharma raja took the guise of a court expert on Dharma. Nakula became a keeper of horses under the name of Damagranthi. Sahadeva became Tantripala. Draupadi became a servant-maid entrusted with the duty of dressing and decorating the queen. It was then that friendship had grown between Bhima and Neela. Neela, who was a special body-guard of king Virata, ate in the kitchen itself. Bhima, now under the name of Valala, proved to be such a good cook that he pleased not only the royal household, but also all those who ate food there. In serving, Bhima's was a generous hand. That was how Bhima won the gratitude and love of Neela. Neela had asked Bhima two or three times, 'Cook, your body- build is excellent. I have heard that you do physical exercise twice every day, in the morning and in the evening. Why not you become a soldier like me?'

Bhima, laughing, "If you are a cook, you can prepare whatever you want and as much as you want, and then eat it. If you are a soldier, all you can do is grin before the cooks. As you now do before me!"

After the termination of the period of incognito, when it was revealed that they were the famous Pandavas, and that he was none other than celebrated Bhima who had killed the court wrestler Kichaka, Neela stood aloof, ashamed of his earlier treatment of Bhima. But Bhima who knew about Neela's bravery, prowess and nature, had got him fixed as his employee at Upaplavya city.

Bhima did not sleep long in the afternoon. Bhima got up early. The other riders were sprawling helter-skelter beneath the shade of trees. It was impossible to travel in the heat of the sun. The idea was to

cover most of the distance in the night. Hence they were sleeping without a care. Bhima fed the horse with powdered wheat soaked in water, then gave it water and finally gave it grass. After that Neela came to Bhima. Thinking that he had come to ask something, Bhima made a sign to him to sit down.

Squatting below on the mat, Neela asked, "King, I have heard that you have fought and killed countless Raksasas. We are now going to seek their assistance. What is the speciality of their warfare? Are they more dexterous than we in the use of bows and arrows?"

Bhima who had just then woken, yawned widely, making his bushy moustache look like a cupola, spoke, "What speciality? You see, the Raksasas are folk who live all the time in the forest, amidst wild animals like the tiger, wild bear, panther and elephant. One has to survive by killing them. Naturally they are least motivated by fear. Especially when compared to us. It is natural that you soon come to acquire some of the qualities of your long-standing enemy. The Raksasas have thus acquired the qualities of the wild animals — ferocity, fearlessness and recklessness. They can rush like wild animals towards the enemy in a battle. Their bodies are tough enough to withstand the rigours of rain, cold and heat. They are strong enough to climb any tree and jump from any height. They can swim in the water or move under-water. They have stomachs tough enough to digest raw flesh. Their skill in archery is astonishing, they can aim at wild animals even without seeing them. They can sense the animals' presence even by the smell."

Neela, "But what sort of warfare could you adopt against them? Was it through arrows or through boxing? Weren't you scared in your first encounter with them?"

Bhima, again with a small yawn, "You mean?" He closed his eyes for a few seconds as if to recollect the past, and bring out items one by one from memory, and said, "What fun is there in a fight which does not give an exhilarating pain to the body? Can hunting tame creatures like calves and deer be real fun? I am very fond of fighting through my hands with club and other direct weapons. Even now I regard the method of shooting arrows from a distance as womanly. Who could match me in hand-to-hand wrestling? Till then my fighting had been nothing more serious than crushing insects! Our kin rival, Duryodhana, had planned to lure us into a lacquer palace and bum us alive. We set fire to it ourselves and escaped through a tunnel. Then we went into hiding."

Neela, "Yes, I have heard that. I was with king Virata when Dharmaraja narrated the whole event to him. I learnt that later when you moved into the forest, when others were sleeping and you were awake, the Raksasa woman, Hidimbadevi, was infatuated with you.

You killed her brother. How did that fight between you two go? Since we are going to that land, I am just trying to learn from you how we can face a sudden attack by the Raksasas."

Bhima was not willing to speak to Neela about the love episode with Hidimbe. But without some mention of it, the episode of fighting with her brother could not be really narrated. After struggling for a while to chose the starting point of his narration, Bhima then recounted the happenings, "Dawn was just breaking then. My mother and brothers were asleep on a clean and level rock, as I recall. I was standing near them, keeping vigil. She was standing close to me. From some corner, some opening in the forest, her elder brother rushed at me. He did not leap, but made a tiger-like movement. I think he must have been around thirty years, and I was perhaps twenty-four or twenty-five. I don't remember distinctly. His body-build was smaller than mine. His palm was wide and strong like a tiger's. It is perhaps more accurate to call them cages rather than palms."

Neela, "What is the colour of their skin?"

Bhima, "Red like us. They do not clad their bodies fully, but expose them to the wind and the sun, to some extent. They become therefore tanned a little. With a single leap he stood before me, roaring, 'With whose permission did you trespass into Hidimbasura's territory? Tell me, you dog.' His was a voice that could pierce the ears of the sun above in the sky! I confess I was scared. I had heard about Raksasas, of course. But I had never seen them. Immediately he turned to his sister. Then he said, 'You who said you would roam along the boundary, what are you doing here talking to this stranger outside our caste? I have over-heard your words of love. Well, I shall deal with you later. Don't forget I am not only your brother but also a king of this land. These fellows are sleeping here without a care as if it is their own house. I shall bash their brains.' Then he immediately picked up the boulder near by, as the Pandavas, awakened by the commotion, began to wink their eyes in fright. As the Raksasa faced them, I lost no time in rushing towards him and held him in a tight fold. Or else sure enough the boulder he was going to hurl at them would have taken at least two lives. The boulder would have crushed them."

Neela, totally absorbed, "What happened next?"

Bhima, "Once I got him in my clasp, the boulder slipped from his hand down my back. It did lacerate my back a little. Didn't do anything to my back-bone. He was a powerful figure, like me. He managed to shrug' off my clasp. I tripped, but fortunately he fell down, face skyward. I immediately fell on him. It was his back that was hurt badly. Only my knees were in some pain. He turned to the

other side on the ground and then screamed in agony. You see, in a battle, time is all. If only one knows what to do, and then did it quickly, one can seize victory. I myself had no idea that I wanted to kill him. Had I known I wanted it I could have simply wrung his neck. I was merely doing a wrestling trick, that of flinging the adversary to lie on his back. He could easily counter that trick. All this action took place on hard rocky surface. It was a dangerous terrain to wrestle on. I knew that if I were to fall down by chance, then my bones would be broken to pieces. I deliberately ran away from the rock and shifted to the ground, a few feet away. As I stood on the ground, he made a dash towards me."

Neela, "Didn't it occur to you even at this point to finish him off?"

Bhima, "No, that was my stupidity. Can you believe what happened to me then? When my legs entangled with his legs or

when I threw, down with a trick his stone-solid body, it gave me real pleasure. Back in Hastinavati where I used to practice bodybuilding in the gymnasium, there was none to match my strength and effort. For a long time, I used to fight with an elephant as my competitor after driving it mad! Such was my itching for fight. The elephant's snout and legs were tough enough to give me pleasure. The stupid animal had only one trick—lifting and coiling its snout. I knew it was dangerous, but yet so great was the urge to fight that I had to do it. Now I had this fellow to fight. I really enjoyed wrestling with him. I immersed myself in the game, the joy of executing its tricks, pushing chest against chest, tangling and twisting thighs and legs, and squeezing his body. Remember one important thing; these Raksasas are very powerfully built. Of course, not as strong as I. But definitely more powerful than other Aryan wrestlers. But theirs is a naive style of fighting, lacking in scientific knowledge and techniques — no idea whatsoever of what tricks to use to disable which part of the body, which part to be immediately clasped, where to apply pressure, which sensitive nerve to be needled to produce temporary paralysis. In short, theirs is the tiger style of fighting. Simply to rush on the enemy and finish him off by squeezing hard the neck, mouth or hand, or to smash the thighs. Just then Arjuna shouted, 'Elder brother, you are now engaged in showing off your wrestling skill, but he is planning all the while to kill you. Don't lose a single moment. Go at him and finish him off…' Well, by then the sleeping entourage woke up and approached us."

Neela, "Didn't they rush at him?"

Bhima, "Just wait. I shall tell you. I was then getting tired. You know I hadn't slept for two nights and one day. I had starved virtually for two days. I had walked continuously one night and one day. Moreover I had walked carrying my mother on my back. My

breath was tending to be short. I was also feeling sleepy. Arjuna and others realised all this. But they also knew one distinctive aspect of my nature. Would you take it lying down if someone invaded your kingdom? Would you be quiet if someone were to kill the game that you have been chasing assiduously? Similarly, wouldn't you feel frustrated if someone killed the enemy you are trying to kill? Arjuna suggested, 'Elder brother, please step aside. I shall shoot an arrow and finish him off.' Naturally, I refused the offer. Roaring Hidimba rushed at me to finish me off. Immediately I knew what I should do. Yet something in my mind was withholding that step. Till then I had practised wrestling systematically and devotedly. I had also plenty of experience. Yet the fact was that I had not killed anybody in such contests. In a way it is easy to kill a person by shooting an arrow from a distance. It is a lit tie more difficult to kill a person by raising and using a sword. But don't you think that the most difficult way of killing a person is through squeezing in a body-to-body fight, especially when you hadn't so far killed anyone? Meanwhile he had wrenched a branch from a Banyan tree. I too seized a branch' from it. He advanced to smash me with that branch. I side-stopped in a reflex action. His blow missed me and he fell on the ground. My blow caught his head, bashed his brain. Blood began to flow. His head had become pulp. His mouth shaped to scream remained half-open and silent. He fell down, soaking the ground red with his blood."

Neela, "What happened next? Was his sister quiet?"

Bhima, "She began to weep loudly, resting her elder brother's head on her lap, and the blood was flowing from it. Frightened by her weeping, the trees and creepers of the forest stood dumb. Some two Raksasas ran towards us. As soon as he heard their movement, Arjuna shot seven or eight arrows one after another. Even before they could see Hidimba's dead body, they themselves fell down screaming. Putting her brother's head on the ground, she walked with blood-soaked feet towards the fallen Raksasas. They were writhing in agony, as the arrows had pierced them at fatal points. Neither of them survived. She ran away and hid herself. We thought she had gone to collect her forces to continue the fight. We had to decide whether to stay there and fight the Raksasas or to flee from the spot. But flee whither? We had lost all sense of direction, lost track of our way. Moreover, if we went back, we had to face Duryodhana's stratagems. If we went forward, danger was certain. And I was feeling hopelessly sleepy. I told them, 'Dharma, Arjuna, Nakulaand Sahadeva,you take care of the situation here. If I stood even for a moment I am bound to collapse, my head is spinning.' Then I hurried to the tree whose branches we had wrenched, and slept off at its foot. All I remember is that I breathed some four times."

Neela, "Didn't the Raksasas return reinforced "

Bhima, "When I woke up, it was already night. No, in fact, I didn't wake up. I saw it was night when mother shook my shoulders. In front of me stood dead Hidimba's sister. Around her seven or eight old Raksasas. There was no sign of war in them. They begged me, 'Our princess will marry this brave one who has killed our king. Please marry her, and be our new king.' Mother approved of their idea.'

Neela, "What next?"

Bhima, "Next? What else? You know I was already in love with her. And what kind of passion it was!"Suddenly he paused, and then proceeded, "You are a warrior. These are not matters of your concern. A soldier should be interested only in matters of warfare. Not the other things." Bhima's attention turned inward. Memories returned with great force. But he hesitated to tell warrior Neela about what took place thirty years ago. As a matter of fact, he had never discussed with any other male such topics as women and erotic love. For a man so old, Bhima was unusually shy in such matters, and his words about them never got beyond the tongue! Bhima's words made Neela also feel embarrassed and shy, coloured by a sense of shame. Neela, therefore, sat quiet, his head bent low. Then he stood up, lifted his face towards the sky, and said, "It's getting late. Let's move out." Then he poked his fingers at the sleeping persons, and shouted at them to wake them up.

The journey was resumed. In the vanguard was Neela on his horse, his sword hanging at the waist, and hanging at the back was the stock of arrows. He was followed by other similarly equipped soldiers on horse. In the middle, Bhima. He was followed by ten riders. All the horses carried, on either side, bags of rice, flour and other grains. Some horses carried cooking utensils, carpets and bed-sheets. The party was going east, with the declining sun on their backs. The sound of moving horses, dust. Bhima ruminated, "In three or four days, we shall reach Hidimba's forest — shall meet wife Salakatankati and son Ghatotkacha." Bhima's mind was in turmoil, as he mentally reviewed the situation. There had been no contact for so many years. Bhima felt self-contempt at the prospect of saying now, "I am Bhima, was your husband for a year, and tell him, I am his father!"He wondered whether it was best to return home without delay. But then they had already started to carry out the mission given by Krishna. Bhima wondered what would happen!"If I tell her that Duryodyana's army with its complement of Raksasas would crush us if we had no countering Raksasas force, would she abuse me, might even administer rapidly four blows on the back asking why I had forgotten her all these days, but I am sure she will not

reject me, and what love she has for me!"Bhima felt it was the kind of love that arose spontaneously and instantaneously. It was so powerful and elemental a love that it prompted even a sister, who, resting her dead brother's head on her lap, had wept till the trees and plants in the forest withered, yet begged the murderer of her brother to marry her! Bhima thought, "Yes, I am really a crude fellow, but a woman's mind is unfathomable, and perhaps if mother had not intervened I might not have agreed to accept her hand." Bhima continued his reflections, "Mother, Dharma, Arjuna and others had decided on the matter before waking me up — they had been pragmatic. Dharma and Arjuna had felt that it was most safe to remain in the Raksasa's territory for a few days, because Duryodhana's people would not enter it — otherwise these man-eaters would skin us and eat us. Their pragmatic approach was natural and right — but mother had spoken differently, 'Child, mind must be mature if one wants to read a woman's love. You are still playful and childish. It is a great sin to refuse a woman who offers herself on the altar of love. In such matters, narrow distinctions like Raksasa, Naga, Ris add, Kirata, Arya and Deva, are irrelevant. She is unmarried. She desires you, and you must fulfil her desire fully. Rise' How to transgress mother's command? — Mother had understood Salakatankati's love before I could. What love it was! That very night she whisked us away to the deeper interior of the forest, and we walked till midnight — there was meat specially cooked for us, enough to satisfy all our hunger — after mother had agreed to the marriage with her. She climbed into the bamboo shelter built atop a tree between two branches, and went to sleep. We, too, had to stay in such shelters. Mother was afraid of climbing a tree, but if she slept below it would be worse, becoming a prey to a tiger or a wild boar. The next day, after the marriage according to the Aryan rites under mother's guidance, on the bank of the waters, she overwhelmed me with passionate love on a boulder some distance away—she licked my body and face with her tongue and bit them with her teeth, repeatedly, never satisfied and what magnificent body she had! Thighs hard enough to make wrestling with them a joy, muscles rippling fish, splendid arms, and good- sized chest, an inexhaustible loveliness, and a body-power capable of lifting and carrying me forcibly to a place of her choice for love-making, if I tried to keep away from her in bed stubbornly — a body-force capable of delivering a few blows on my back if she got angry, and a passion with which she would crush me hard in her arms the next moment — a companion in every act, in hunting, swimming, running in the bamboo shelter on the tree-top, and while escaping from the wild elephants coming for us — she had the strength to nurse the husband like a child - and love-making with her gave the same pleasure as wrestling with a rival of equal strength and skill. But with Krishne not even a day went like this, and she was a gentle, soft creature, a

flower one should hold and smell with utmost care lest it wither, all her skill and power were confined to words and their tricky world, in the bend of her eye-brows, in the silence of her tears, she never invaded my body like Salakatankati, one had to read her desires and hopes in the changing light of her eyes, or else one was doomed to total incomprehension, and I was told this was the ideal for an Aryan wife!. When I asked her why she didn't behave like Salakatankati, she would contort her face, raising her eyebrows and say, "I will not do her way!"All right, but did I not work myself to death to save her honour and modesty? After the game of dice, when Dussasana stripped her saree, when Jayadratha wanted to carry her off in the forest, and when Kichaka aspired for her —had it been Salakatankati, she would have taken out Dussasana's intestines and made a garland of them, would have twisted the throat of Jayadratha's tall head and bashed it against a nearby boulder, she would have squeezed Kichaka's genitals and removed them! But Krishne is a real helpless female, a true Aryan damsel, and yet it was impossible to disobey her wishes, and I felt that the primary goal of my male-hood was to protect her, punish those trying to violate her modesty, and to fulfil every one of her demands. Salakatankati, however, had never made such demands on me to demonstrate my male-hood, and I had no occasion to fulfil them. Now I am off to seek her help..."Bhima felt ashamed of himself and felt like calling off the mission.

The sun had set and it was past evening. They could see that soon the mountainous tract would cease and open, plain land would start. Neela commented, "Very soon Matsya country would end. A little further will be the Bhoja country. You know that is the former land of the Yadavas, the Mathura country. We need to rest." It was getting dark slowly. In the far distance lay a small range of hills, and, excepting for it, all else was level land. Neela suggested, "Shortly there will be moonlight. In another few hours we shall reach a place with water. We shall halt there, eat and then journey for the rest of the night."

Bhima now realised that they had travelled so far that there was no question of retreating. He fell into inward thinking, "We have come so far. What will the warriors think if I now suggest going back? Not proper to back out after proceeding in a certain direction. Shouldn't have started the journey, but having started out, shouldn't return." All of a sudden I remembered mother." It ignited my anger. Why did she do this? It was she who persuaded me that it was a sin to reject Salakatankati's advances and then made me marry her; it was also she who urged me to leave the forest after seven or eight months and go to some Aryan land; and poor Salakatankati laboured so hard to keep mother and us four brothers in comfort! For our sake she made arrangements for tasty cooked meat, and, running counter

to her people's custom, she even got them built huts on the ground, surrounded by a fence, well guarded in the night by Raksasas. She managed to provide us with a regular supply of roots, fruits and shoots, and yet mother was so anxious to leave the place! I myself overheard mother say, 'Bhima is hopelessly trapped in Salakatankati's love, and is prepared to settle down here. We must see that he agrees to leave may be after the delivery of a child by Salakatankati'. What love could it be? Salakatankati was so lithe and fast she could leap from branch to branch. But later, with her belly swollen and a burden, she found it hard to climb our tree-hut, and while on the hunt she would lean against me, unable to run,breathing hard, and it moved me to such pity. Could this be called love? Meanwhile how heart-renderingly she entreated me, 'Do you want to desert me? Your mother told me that it would not be possible for you to stay here. Tell me what I should do to please her and persuade her to stay here?' In the night, scared that I might slip away unnoticed, she entwined her arms with mine, resting her heavy belly on one side. She indicated several times that my other brothers could 'marry any Raksasas damsels of their choice; right from the start, mother never had any unqualified love for her. Now I understand it all better. It was she who suggested that her name should be changed from Salakatankati to one better suited to an Aryan wife. So she named her Karnalapalike. And with what enthusiasm she accepted the new name! She repeated it at least ten times to herself! She ordered all her people to use only that name! It never occurred to me then why mother named her Karnalapalike, the Guardian of Lotus, one who has the duty of looking after a lotus - why not Karnalamukhi, the Lotus-faced one, and only Karnalapalike? Why not Karnalalochane, the Lotus-eyed One? Bhima recalled her face, her form, her beauty, her full-fledged flesh, face round like a lotus, fair complexion, and... mother was unfair, even deceitful, in giving her a name; she showed discrimination, partiality in naming her. Mother was worried, 'No matter how secure and fearless our life here, no Aryan food, or clothes. If we stayed here longer we shall become indistinguishable from the Raksasas.' And Karnalapalike pleaded with me to stay, 'Pease do not leave us, no matter where your mother and brothers may go. The entire Raksasas. tribe worships you as their king, and see how loyal and obedient they are to you/ No Salakatankati, that is no name for you. When mother heard her words, mother was furious, and screamed, This witch seems determined to separate my son from me and his brothers. This sort of trickery will not do with Kunti. Let us leave here this day itself.' But eventually it was decided to stay on till three months after the delivery of the baby, not a moment later! For full one month, the daughter-in-law and the mother-in-law competed with each other in pouring tears for my benefit! Suppose at that time I had been adamant and insisted on staying behind after sending them—mother

and four brothers—off?" Bhima was full of preoccupation with the past. That gave his mind some solace. Had he stuck to that decision, he would not have had to beg for the assistance of a wife and son whom he had not seen for years. This idea lightened his heart.

By then darkness had turned into moonlight. The hoofs of the horses made a sound like the rainfall. Dust rose waist-high. A little further away, dogs began to bark. Four soldiers on horseback moved closer and blocked the path. They queried, "Who are you? Whither are you bound?" As pre-planned, Neela answered, "We are folk from Virata King. We are off to fetch Brahmins from the court of Drupada, as they are needed for a sacrificial rite." Not satisfied, the strangers questioned, "Why so many people on such a simple errand?" Neela replied, "royal etiquette "There were no more questions asked. Neela obtained from them information about the location of the next available water-place.

After reaching the pond, they all washed themselves, cooling their bodies. They ate the remnants of the midday meal in the pleasant moonlight, and drank water. Then they resumed their journey. At first the horses galloped out, but soon they slowed down, tired, just about when the dawn was breaking, they reached a grove, tied the horses to the trees, and left two persons to guard them. The rest slept on dry leaves spread like a mattress on the ground.'They slept till noon, ate, and went back to sleep. The journey resumed in the evening. Neela had informed them that by midnight they would be entering the Panchala region. After the meal, Bhima woke up at the end of a sleep lasting some two hours. The sun was still shining. He washed his sticky body, when Neela got up and approached him. He sat a few feet away from Bhima on the mattress. He was still and quiet.

Bhima, "What is it, Neela?"

Neela, "Nothing really. Just resting quietly."

Bhima, "I am sure you are not the type to stay quiet. Out with it. What's on your mind?"

Neela, "Maharaja, they say that you killed with your bare fists a Raksasas who gobbled up every day a cartful of food, two oxen that pulled the cart, and an adult human. Please tell me how you did it. I want to hear it straight from your mouth."

Bhima, "Who told you about it?"

Neela, "In our town the incident has become a legend, where everybody talks about a Pandava, whose name was Bhima. The legend has been current for over two decades now. That is why, when people knew that you were the same Bhima, they flocked

round you in sheer admiration. Even now for the local folk you are a superhuman hero."

Bhima, "Yes, it is true that a cartful of food, the pair oxen or buffaloes that pulled it, and an adult human, were consumed daily. Not by the Raksasas alone but by his entire family and his followers. Yes, it is true that I killed their leader in straight fist-fight, and scared his followers away from that place."

Neela, "In what town did this take place? Were there no king and army to tackle such man-eaters, to kill them or to scare them away?"

Bhima, "Are all rulers really powerful? Or do the powerful always become rulers? Do you think your king Virata is powerful? Wasn't there a wolf among men, Kichaka, the brother-in-law of Virata, whom I killed? Well, there, too, prowled a wolf."

Neela, "What town was it?"

Bhima, "It was called Ekachakranagara. After spending a year in the forest country of Hidimba, we moved south. That is beyond the Kuru land. We were still apprehensive of Duryodhana's hired assassins. We were at a loss to know what next to do. After moving further southward for four days, we came across the sage, Krishna Dwaipayana. Ever heard of that name?"

Neela, "Yes, I have seen him. It was when he visited our kingdom fifteen years ago. It seems nobody has mastered the Vedas as he has. The entire town prostrated at his feet."

Bhima, "We identified ourselves to him. In a way, he is our grandfather. You see, when our grandfather died without children, he performed Niyoga on our grandmothers to produce our father and Duryodhana's father. So he had for us the love due to grandchildren. He advised us to go to the near-by town of Ekachakra and live there, and collect alms in the guise of Brahmins. He asked us to do this for about eight months when he would be away in the Kuru land. Meanwhile, he promised that he would consult Vidura and advise us as to the future course of action. That's how we went to that town. We went to a Brahmin's house there. That household had seen better days earlier, but when we met them they were in dire poverty. Our mother requested the Brahmin to give us shelter.

He agreed to let us stay in the back portion of his house. We lived there. All the five of us chanted Vedic texts and mantras indifferent streets and collected alms. Do you understand the humiliation of it? You are Ksatriya, aren't you?"

Neela, "Of course, I am, yes."

Bhima, "When I went to beg, they would taunt us, saying, 'Look

here, you look like a professional wrestler. If hacked, you will produce four parts as large as four men. Aren't you ashamed of begging?' I was mostly the target. I would get furious, and thought that I had been better off in the forest. That was a better fate."

Neela, 'Then why did you leave the forest?"

Bhima, "Our mother urged us to hurry from there. She feared that if we continued to stay in the forest, we would turn into Raksasas ourselves, living on raw meat in the company of wild animals. Any way I was reluctant to live by begging, especially with my huge body! I had virtually stopped begging. The others fared much better as beggars as they had more suitable appearance. Out of the food they collected nearly half was consumed by me. I spent all my time in body-building in a corner of the house."

Neela, "The body would ache if one does not exercise it, isn't that true?"

Bhima, 'If one doesn't exercise the body, it is an indication that one is not a wrestler. The folk in the Brahmin family enquired whether I was a wrestler because I looked and behaved like one. Mother managed to quench their curiosity by laughing away the matter, saying that I had just developed my body a little! Had she said I was a wrestler, then the word would have got around, especially through the neighbours. The fact that we were five brothers with a widowed mother would have easily given usaway, and Duryodhana's secret agents would have made the right inference and informed him. Luckily nobody could discover our identity. In the beginning, we could obtain enough through begging. But as we had to approach the same houses from day to day, right in the early morning, how do you expect the same degree of generosity? From one bagful it was reduced to a three-quarters. Then to a half. Later even less. Even Dharma, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva became frustrated and refused to go with begging bag. Yet there was no other way we could feed ourselves. No we couldn't leave the town because we were waiting for the promised visit of the great sage, Krishnadwaipayana. They were days of semi-starvation for us all. It was worse for me, almost total starvation! Occasionally they went out to near-by towns to beg. But there were no big villages or towns in the neighbourhood. We considered deploying three of us in a different town to obtain more and send it to the two remaining in Ekachakra town. Mother would have none of it. She insisted on her five children staying together. What could we do under the circumstance? Since it was a populous and large town, we could get not even a rabbit to hunt even if we went a considerable distance from it. Well, it was our darkest time."

Neela had no comments. He simply said "yes ". He didn't know

what else the Pandavas could have done. Bhima continued, "Daily we cursed our misfortune. Cursed Duryodhana, and sighed. Slept covering our stomachs with wet cloth. Beyond this, we had nothing else to do. But by this time we were in possession of an interesting piece of information. We learnt that the ruler of Ekachakra resided in a town called Vetrakigriha, and that he ruled over all these people. He was said to be totally chicken-hearted. Not that he lacked an army or other entourage. He had them all. But what use is an army if the king lacked courage? His father had been a powerful ruler. The succession there was through the eldest son, and that's how that despicable coward came to be crowned the king. How can the son of a king automatically become a king in quality and ability? Why not a commoner possess the qualities of being a king? Naturally everything there happened as it should under a cowardly king. Some eight miles away, on the bank of river Yamuna,a Raksasa had established himself with his followers. They just invaded any town they felt like, and killed and ate humans at random. They carried off cattle, money and grain. They terrorised the whole region. Then the people approached the king and appealed for help. The king tried to tackle the Raksasas with his army. But the Raksasas rushed at them with thundering voice, scaring the life out of he ruler. Every part of his body shook with fear, and he embraced his body-guards in sheer fright. His soldiers stood transfixed in fear. In the situation, an agreement was arrived at between the king and that Raksasas, who was called Bakasura.

According to its terms, the king was required to send every noon to Bakasura a cartload of tasty food, a pair of oxen or buffaloes to pull it, and an adult human being. In return, Bakasura was required to refrain from plundering and terrorising the people, and also to defend the kingdom against external aggression. Now do you catch the significance of this agreement?"

Neela, "Well, what is it?"

Bhima, "The stupid ruler was relieved of the responsibility of defending his territory, and he also escaped from the duty to protect his subjects from the Raksasas. But assisted by those Raksasas, he could enjoy his throne. Daily each family in the town had to feed the Raksasas by turns. Well, when a worthless person ascends a throne, he would naturally manage to keep his position by using forces against each other, manipulating to preserve his own security intact. Meanwhile, the subjects will pay their taxes and other dues. Each town was to supply one human being by turn, as I have said. One day it was the turn of our town. This was announced by a royal messenger. As one entered the town, the first house happened to be our Brahmin host's. This meant that it was his responsibility to provide the feeding for the next day — a cartload of food, two

bullocks and a human being. How could that poor Brahmin collect the necessary, items at such a short notice? Even if he could manage the provisions by disposing of his possessions or by borrowing, where could he find a human being? How to pick the person in the family for the sacrifice? The wealthy, of course, could always pour wealth and hire 4 poor and needy person to substitute. But how many such wealthy families can be there? The previous day, the royal messenger informed our host that it was his turn to feed the Raksasas the next noon. His family comprised himself, his wife, a marriageable daughter, and a teen aged son. They all started sobbing loudly at the prospect of losing a member of the family. The helpless husband blamed the poo- wife. The wife blamed the husband. The two children embraced the parents. The couple held hands. They all cried together. The husband said that the next day he would go with the cart. Well, wasn't it right that he should go? But the wife protested, 'No, do you know what would be the consequence if you go? TH be a widow and nobody will respect my honour.

Ruffians will carry off this marriageable girl. The king does not have guts to punish such ruffians. So let me go. You stay behind to take care oft he children.' The girl whispered a way out. She suggested, 'Let's all four of us run away this midnight from here, and cross the borders of this kingdom.' The father pointed out that from that very evening spies would be watching their house. He reminded them that this was a plan he had urged them to carry out four years ago, and that it was now too late. He recalled that his wife had dismissed the idea as unnecessary, and had determined to stay. Now they all regretted the earlier decision of the wife. They could find no way out. They started weeping together again. When all this discussion took place, I was sleeping in a room which formed part of the house. The other four brothers had gone out. I did not know why the family was crying like that. Hearing their talk, mother went to them and got the full information. Then she sat in gloom, not knowing what to do. Then she woke me up and told everything. She said, 'Child, they have given us a full year's shelter. Even when they are themselves poor, they have saved us from starvation. Now, shouldn't we seize this opportunity to return our debt to them?' I asked her, 'Mother, tell me what we should do.' She replied, T shall tell them that you will accompany the cart. Later all your brothers can think of some idea to finish off that Raksasa and his kith and kin. That way we shall not only be repaying a debt but also earn the merit of killing a murderous brute and his followers. You see, I detest the whole Raksasa folk, in spite of your fascination for that Raksasa woman, Karnalapalike. These non-aryans who eat raw meat will not hesitate to eat human flesh.' Of course, I was angry that Salakatankati was abused, but I was thrilled at the idea of killing the Raksasa. I did know something about that Raksasa. I asked our host

about the details. It seems the demon lived with his people in a cave some eight miles away from the town on the bank of the Yamuna. Only his wife and children were with him. All these days he had become used to cooked rice and other delicacies. Raw animal and human flesh provided the variety. His other Raksasa comrades did not stay with him all the time. They were scattered in several forests. They had kith and kin right upto the forests of the Kuru land, and to the east upto the Magadha forests. The cattle that accompanied the cart were usually killed for food when many of the clan visited. The human being and the cartload of rice were finished by the next noon. These details were enough for me to piece together a picture of the situation. My four brothers joined me in the room after I had got the details. We six, five brothers and mother, began to hatch a plan to meet the situation. We asked ourselves, was it possible to kill the Raksasa, Bakasura? Yes, it was certainly possible. I did not allow any prolonged discussion. But there was also the question, whether killing that demon is not giving away our Pandava identity? Dharma assured us that we could overcome this difficulty. We stopped the discussion and decided to act the next day. We planned to take with us the cart loaded with rice and other items. When mother told our host that she had decided to send her second son with the cart, he did not accept the offer. He felt that he would be incurring sin by consenting to our plan, but mother eventually persuaded him. Well,who wouldn't agree to a plan that saved their lives? She asked them to procure the required grain and other materials. They sold away their assets,meagre as they were, and bought rice, ghee, oil, jaggery and wheat. I was then always virtually starved, but that day I could get my fill. I had another sumptuous meal that night. That gave me some strength. The others also ate."

Neela's face glowed with triumph. He saw that the next part of the story would be the fight with the Raksasa. He jumped forward, full of eagerness to hear the action part of the story. His movement forward was also due to the fact that the earlier spot was under the full blaze of the sun, which he wanted to avoid.

Bhima continued, "Before going to bed, we reviewed the situation carefully. We decided that all five of us should go. I was to start the fight with bare fists. Dharma said that the others would back me up with bows and arrows. Ever since we started begging, Arjuna had lost touch with his bow. The next morning he began to practice his archery a little. Nakula and Sahadeva also followed suit. But my thinking was altogether different. He was my quarry, and I needed no other assistance in killing him. Since I had spent a year among the Raksasas, I had a measure of their techniques and temperament. They rush together recklessly, just like wild animals. But kill one of them, the animals flee. Kill the Raksasa leader, then the rest will take to their heels. They lack the frame of thinking in terms of strategy

and tactics, co-ordinating time and space in warfare. Theirs is the style of overpowering with physical force, not of forethought and plan. If only one is not overwhelmed by their initial force, stood one's ground, kept cool and planned intelligently, it was no problem to vanquish the Raksasa forces. Since Baka had so long enjoyed the cartload of food and other i terns without opposition, he was accustomed to receive them alone. Moreover, the fighting itch had bitten me deeply. The other four came round to my view. Mother ordered the other four to position themselves around that spot with bows and arrows. I did not oppose this. Then I went off to sleep. My dream was all about the coming fight with Baka.

It was the first time that the town was asked to feed the Raksasa. Moreover I, a foreigner, had opted to sacrifice myself to save the life of a townsman. The entire town turned up to watch me start on my journey. Utterly shameless people. If even half of those gathered there had shown courage and grit, they could have rushed at Baka, killed him, and then killed the ruler himself to replace him by a more competent ruler. The oxen pulled the heavy cart slowly. They also had to manage my weight. Throughout the journey I was munching something or the other. I deliberately delayed the movement by stopping the cart on the road. The idea was to enrage Baka through delaying the delivery. I was ready to tackle him with a branch I had wrenched from a tree. As soon as I reached the spot, Baka roared, asking why there was delay. I provoked him by saying, 'So that your father can ask why!' 'Who is the fool who can dare retort to me,' he screamed and rushed at me. He was alone. My earlier fight with Hidimba two years ago and this fight were different. Then I was a novice, but now I knew thoroughly the weaknesses of the Raksasa style of the fighting. Also I was there now not just to show off my skill. I was planning right from the start to kill him. I had experience of killing men' The enraged wild beast knows only to rush at its target but lacks the intelligence and skill to avoid the enemy's blows. Similarly Baka rushed towards me. I side-stepped and hit him with the branch at a vulnerable spot. He was shaken, and I didn't let him recover. I hit him again, and that finished him. I thought for a while for my next move. In the meanwhile hearing his screams, women and children inside the cave ran to the spot. I hung his corpse across my shoulder and ran towards them. Scared, they ran back to the cave. I ran after them, and threw the corpse near the door of the cave. Then I shouted to them in the Raksasa language, Tell your folk that if any Raksasa dares come here, I shall crush him.' I expected these women to attack me. I don't know why they didn't do so. May be, they had become soft like our women after years of comfort. May be Bakasura was not a pure Raksasa. Or may be the death of the head of their household frightened them. When I returned to the cart, I found the oxen had toppled the cart out of sheer fright. Unable to

endure the tight rope round their necks, they were breathing very hard. The rice had mingled with the dust. Then I set the cart right and drove back to the town. My brothers waited behind a tree till it got dark and then returned home. From that day on, no Raksasa dared step into that kingdom. The following day I inspected the cave and found it totally deserted. All that remained there now were dry bones and lumps of flesh. They had all fled."

Neela, somewhat disappointed, "Was that all? No further details?"

Bhima, "Well, I told you the battle was over in a minute."

The summer heat had silenced all sounds in the air. Sweat was dripping from the bodies of those sleeping beneath the trees. As the sun hit their eyes, some of the sleepers found it necessary to shift to shadier spots. But for the cawing of a lonely crow, the world was virtually dead. Absolutely silent.

After a while, Neela asked, "Didn't people shower honour on you as the brave killer of the demon. They must have been afraid of you."

Bhima, "Of course, they were so scared of me they stood away from me, all over the street."

Neela, "After getting the news, the ruler, too, must have been scared!"

Bhima, "May be."

Neela, "You could have slain that ruler and occupied the throne of that kingdom. People would have welcomed you with joy "

Bhima, "What did you say?!"

Neela, "I said, after killing him... well, why didn't you do that?"

Bhima repeated the question to himself, but he had no answer. He tried to remember what had happened. He felt now that perhaps he could have done that. Feeling defeated and depressed, he sat silently. His head was empty with not a thought. He could feel the stickiness of the sweat. Then he walked to the pond. He took the water fetched by Neela and washed away the sweat from the neck, head, face, back, arms, and heavy arm pits. During the scrubbing operation, Neela woke the sleepers one by one till they all were up. They let the horses drink water to their fill, and, after thoroughly washing themselves, got on the horses.

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Chapter 17

THE journey resumed. Neela in the vanguard, as usual. Bhima reminisced: "We could have easily become the rulers of Vetrakigriha. That was what the people wanted. Perhaps the ruler himself would have surrendered to us in sheer fright! We would have been spared trouble from Duryodhana and wiles. But it never occurred to us then." On either side thick groves of tall trees. Between, the cool path. Very soothing. May be they were close to some town. Bhima went back to the past, "But what really happened then? Those around us asked mother how I had that kind of power. She told them it was some sort of a divine gift. She said with pride that my power was derived from the army chief of the gods. She explained to them proudly that such power could not have been ordinary and human. I, too, felt proud. I carried mother on my shoulder, finished off Hidimba, and now killed Baka, and later demolished many more! Yes, Jarasandha, an old fellow, and it was no great credit killing him. Then all the rulers of the east, fearing me, paid me tributes one after another. I caught Saindhava who had come to steal Draupadi and shaved his head off. I made a pulp of Kichaka's flesh. Aryavarta has yet to realise the full powers of this Bhima. If this Bhima does not make pulp out of the flesh and bones of Duryodhana and his ilk, let it be a blot on the God who generated him. Let mother realise again that this Bhima is not the one who can bring disrepute to the seed out of which he had sprouted. While I was driving the cart towards Baka's cave, the messengers from the king of Panchala had announced the Svayamvara of Drupada's daughter. The condition for winning her hand in marriage was tough — it was announced that the princess would marry the person who could lift the huge, copper-crafted bow, as tall as of a person standing, and shoot an arrow. By the time I returned from my fight with Baka, mother had made her decision. That night, she whispered to us, 'Let's all go there to the court of Drupada. You have lost touch with your bows. Well, now start practicing intensely. Arjuna, you should do it a little more intensely. The Panchalas and the Kurus have been traditionally hostile to each other. If we can win matrimonial relation with them, it is as good as winning their army. We need not be afraid of Duryodhana. They can never succeed in cheating us. Mother had a

sharp mind. Well, it reminded me. It has been now thirteen and a half years since I last set eyes on her. She could not endure the exile in the forest — the exposure to sun, rain, cold, and restless wandering and frequent starvation. Yet she refused to stay behind in our in-laws' house with grand-children. She refused to go to Dwaraka. She said she would remain in Hastinavati and that none could snatch away her authority and position. From the start she desired intensely that we should rule in Hastinavati. Well, we went to Khandavaprastha and transformed it into Indraprastha, performed Rajasuya., and even eclipsed the glory of Hastinavati itself. Yet, one day she advised me, 'Child, after all, this place was originally not ours, however gloriously you may have made it. Really Hastinavati should have come to your lot. That crafty blind fellow used his cunning to exile you from it once again. Those wise old men proved utterly useless for us.' How did I live for thirteen and a half years without her? How is she now? Uncle's messenger's account of her can never equal a direct sight of her. He says hair is like combed cotton white, and reduced in quantity. The face less wide than before. Her back is bent, the back of my mother. Why should our mother's back be so bent? How old is she now?" Bhima calculated, but did not quite succeed in it. Then he reflected, she is past eighty any way. Why should her back be bent? Had I been with her, I would have massaged her back daily with oil after washing it with hot water. Now the exile and the period of incognito have been finished.

"When we sent word that she should come and attend the marriage of her grand-son Abhimanyu, she refused to come, saying, 'How can I go to anybody's house, just like that, simply because you want me to? Take me after you have earned your own kingdom.' Well, Dharma is chicken-hearted. Not like mother who is more of a man than him. Is it because he is a coward that Dharma wears the mask of moral rectitude and self-righteousness? Has he the courage to call himself son of his mother? They tell me I was a big child filling mother's arms. Mother found it hard to breathe while carrying me in that mountainous terrain, going up and down. So heavy was I as a child! Yet she continued to carry me around. Wasn't I seven years old when father died? I have very imperfect memory of those days. Dharma, he used to carry me. Carrying me made him breath hard. Therefore he would merely walk holding my hand. How did father look? My memory has dissolved, melting into other images, memories running far back in years, to the time when I was a mere boy of seven. Was he like his brother Dhritarashtra? Tut, tut, father certainly did not have blind eyes. They, father and his brother, were born of sisters. They sprouted from a common seed, the seeds of the Niyo^a-performing father. Yet where is the rule that a common seed should produce similar off-spring?" The sun was sinking in the west, sinking beyond the trees and plants and through their interstices,

behind their backs. Their attention turned to the path. Panchala was nearing. Panchala was a more fertile land than Virata's Matsya country. It was rich in every way — in water, vegetation, rains and harvests. To the west and south ran an excellent network of roads. To the east and north flourished denser forests. Beyond were the snow-clad mountains. Suppose father had been alive, would he have approved of their taking Panchala's daughter as a bride? It was a very ancient feud that divided the households. Father was a great warrior, one who extended the bounds of Kuru territory. Mother herself had been saying — had father been alive, his powerful sons would have performed the Rajasuya rite, and the horse ritual of world conquest, in his name, enabling him to earn fame as the most glorious ruler in all Arya and Brahma territories. Why did he die so young? He died at thirty-five, the same age as mother's. Then she had returned to Hastinavati with her five little children, traversing mountainous lands, green with vegetation under floating blue clouds. Our aunt was of a slighter build than mother. Her eyes were sharp like the eyes of deer. We were hustled to the hut but we got the news that she was burnt to cinders in the funeral pyre with father — at least I and Dharma got the news. Nakula and Sahadeva were too young to understand anything. It was an age when memories didn't stick. When mother set out from there with us, all the leaders and chiefs of the land of Devas were present — they had produced us through Niyoga — Dharma's father Dharmadhikari, my father Maruttha, Arjuna's father Indra, ruler of that land, and Nakula and Sahadeva's fathers, who were excellent healers of body's ills. It seemed they were unrivalled as men of medicine. They administered medicine to father for so many years. Yet why didn't father live? Mother knows everything, but she doesn't open her mouth to reveal things to us. Yet she admonished us repeatedly — "Never be like the usual members of this lineage, never run after servant-maids, never indu Ige too much in sex. She not merely admonished us, kept a close vigil on our movements, even at that young age. Did father die of overindulgence in sex? The blind fellow has a hundred sons. Of them eighty-six came out of servant-maids' wombs. Would they all meet me in the battle to discharge their paternal debt? I shall wipe them out like I do the ants under my foot. What do they think of Bhima's powers? He is son of Maruttha. Son born to the semen of the warrior chosen by the Devas to lead their armed hosts! A son of Pandu! Didn't he pulverise the flesh and bones of Kichaka, celebrated throughout the Aryan land as a redoubtable wrestler? Yes, my memory of father is clear, distinct. With one act he could lift me and settle me on his left forearm. How tight his embrace was! Mother made me bow to him in reverence. Yes, this Bhima, son of Maruttha, will wipe out the entire progeny of the blind fellow in a single sweep..."Then Bhima was jolted out of the past into the present. Considerable time had elapsed since the sun-set. It was pitch dark all around. Moonlight

would appear later than on the previous day. Horses in front, horses in the rear. Horses moved straight of their own accord without the need for any rider to manipulate their direction or pace. The rider at the head of the procession set the pace. Others followed suit. Again Bhima fell into meditation over the past — "My thighs, bottom, and waist are aching badly. It was after a gap of thirteen and a half years that I was riding a horse. As Neela had said, I could have been in a royal chariot. But in this roadless forest of the Raksasas, can a chariot ply? Just a day's journey remained. Dust and din. Fine-ground dust rose and spread like snow — yes like snow, the snow I remember indistinctly. As a boy I would squat on a rock, staring at the mountains in the north. The drone of jumping waters. Blue veil. Those mountains that spat cold mist from the trees, plants and boulders, dotting their kin! High up there the white peaks, looking at the plains with dazzling eyes. When I tried to climb up there, mother would order me not to, tying me up with a rope. Up there were the Deva race. She feared that if I went alone, I might get lost among them, and become part of them. If I asked her to accompany me she would be all enthusiasm and cheer. But father would refuse. He did not have the strength to climb. Breathing became hard. The land of the Devas is all white, they say. Memory tortures me. Must return there. Must go back to climb up the terrain made up of white peaks, white lakes and ponds, white undulations. During the exile, we spent our summers in the land at the foot of the Himalayas. But that was Gandharva country, not yet the country of Devas. Arjuna is the most fortunate among us. He was there in the land of the Devas, the land of white peaks, white lakes and ponds, and white undulations."

A short while after the fall of moonlight, they came across a big river. Sufficiently big. There was a lot of sandy stretch before the descent into its water. The unpleasantness of the sticky sweat automatically vanished. As the sand filled their hoofs, the horses slowed down irt pace. But sensing the water ahead, they increased it. Though there was moonlight, the rider at the head held a burning torch. Even when the water was some hundred steps ahead, Neela got off, and asked the others to do the same. He said, " The summer heat would attract the thirsty tigers and cheetahs. The elephants are always there. Don't put out the torch. If you find some dry wood and sticks on the bank, make a heap of them and light it." All of them got off their horses. Some fifteen of them handed the reins to others, and went in search of fuel wood.

Bhima asked Neela who had now moved close to him, "Isn't this river Yamuna?"

Neela, "Yes. I came to consult you. It is said that in summer Yamuna does not have as many powerful currents as Ganga in the depth. I am not very familiar with the rivers of Matsya country.. You have lived

on the bank of Yamuna. You have knowledge of its nature and behaviour. I am making this enquiry to take a decision. Do you think it is feasible to cross the river this night itself? It is not just a question of our crossing it. The horses carrying the luggage on their backs must also be able to cross. It is important that grains, flour and other food shouldn't get wet. It is likely that midway we may run into an unexpected depth. This spot looks deep, certainly.

But how deep is it?"

Bhima, "Send someone with a bamboo stick to measure and test the depth."

Neela, "Yes, I shall get that done. There is another matter. Some four hours after we cross the river, we shall be entering the Panchala country. Then we turn left according to calculation. When we turn left we get into the Raksasa territory, which is our destination. Tonight we reach Panchala, and then sleep from midnight till morning. We would have rested sufficiently, and by the time we wake up the sun would be high in the sky. The sun doesn't matter because, after all, we shall be traversing the forest. It would be a difficult journey, with no clearly marked off roads and routes. Therefore, let's now sleep here on the river-bank. In the morning, we can start, off very early and reach the borders of the Raksasa territory. And there we shall ascertain the correct route. Day after tomorrow we shall enter that territory in the coolness of the morning. In any case you have some familiarity with the terrain — trees, boulders and streams, the details."

Bhima, "Well, it is the memory of a very remote past."

Neela, "Yet I was told that the Raksasa territory hasn't changed a bit. Suppose it had been an Aryan territory, the land would have been transformed beyond recognition through clearing of the trees and vegetation in order to cultivate the land, the emergence of new human settlement, construction of cattle-sheds and roads. Isn't that .so?"

Bhima remembered something else. Yes, the memory of demolishing the trees and plants, of clearing the forest for cultivation, for building a new township, a township that had transformed the original landscape beyond recognition. He responded to Neela's question with a simple, "yes ".

Neela, "Maharaja, we imagine that we have forgotten things. But once we go back to the site, every single i tem is vividly recalled. I used to think that I had clean forgotten the town of my grandmother, which I had seen as young boy. But no, last year I went there, after a lapse of twenty years. It all came back to me in vivid detail, even the little lanes and the bushes through which I chased the pups. We were

six children, and even the spot where my uncle forced me to learn swimming I could identify as if the event had been fresh, a day or two old!"

"Yes, " Bhima said.

Neela, 'Well, what course of action would you advise?"

'Yes', said Bhima again.

Neela saw that the king's mind was busy elsewhere. He proceeded to send two persons, experts in swimming, to gauge the depth of the water. Meanwhile, dry sticks and twigs were being piled up. Neela decided in his mind not to bum the whole lot in one stretch, and the others agreed saying, "The weather is cool. It is moonlight. Such large trees and such a big river. Can we get them in our country if we want them? Let's spend the night here and move out in the morning."

They ate the food cooked in the afternoon. Neela decided to scare away the wild animal with a small fire, and also to post by turns men to guard them with bows and arrows. On the soft sand, they spread the mat, with a thick cloth on it. Bhima stretched his legs. R e big river was running nearby without sound. This was the biggest he had seen, excepting, of course, the Ganga. The scene sent him on another journey through memory - "On the bank of this very river stands our Indraprastha. But how far away from here? We have reached here without touching the Kuru country, which means that Indraprastha is in the up-country some two days' journey on horse. When we were living in Indraprastha, how many moonlit nights did we spend on the river-bank? Moonlight during summer meant invariably spending most of the night on the sands. For a number of days, Krishna used to be with us on the sands. He was born and grew up on the bank of this very river. That explains his enormous love for it. As much as I have for the Ganga. Krishna had said, 'Bhima, let Duryodhana and his people keep the bank of the Ganga. Do not think that Yamuna is less than your Ganga. If you go down the river-bank, you have my birth-place, Mathura. Let us denude this Khandava forest and clear it for cultivation, readying the soil. Let us build a great city on the spot now occupied by a tiny village. Let it have no parallel in the whole of the Aryan world. 'His is real zeal. There is no end for his intelligence and enthusiasm for creating new things. One should tire of its spectacle, so much is there to see in it. I believe he has built such a lovely city, Dwaraka. I have never been there even once, Must visit it after this war is over. Khandava is no ordinary forest! It is denser than Hidimbars - no, why use this wretched name — Salakatankati's forest. The Nagas inhabit it. Khandavaprastha is a village in the heart of that forest. Fierce wild animals infested it, and its climate was most sickly. After we allied with king Drupada through marriage, the blind fellow, making a pretense of loving us, manoeuvred cunningly

to foist the forest village on us. He said, wiping his tearless eyes, 'Child, Dharma, when I heard that the summer fires burnt the house you inhabited, I agonised over it as if my heart itself had burnt. After all, one attends to a younger brothers children's welfare more than to one's own. Thanks to the meritorious record of our Kuru lineage, you came out alive from the danger. Some wicked and mischievous persons have spread the false rumour that my son, Duryodhana, was behind the burning of your house. Now, I am relieved that he escaped the public censure of having been responsible for your death.' He wiped the non-existing tears from his eyes. Maybe there were some tears. May be if one were to forcibly open the eyes eternally closed to the world, one may have the illusion of seeing the tears! The blind fellow continued, 'True, Duryodhana is given to some mischief. After all, he is still very young. But no child of the Kuru family can be so wicked as to get his brothers killed. Let it pass. I have decided that in future you and your brothers, on the one side, and Duryodhana and his brothers, on the other, should not live in the same place. You know, there is our own Khandavaprastha in the south. It was the ancient capital of rulers of yore like Ayu, Pururava and Nahusha, wasn't it? Only much later the royal residence was shifted to Hastinavati. I learn that now, because of disuse, that place is in a bad shape, overgrown with trees and wild plants. You five can go there and rule in splendour. Shouldn't the southern part of the Kuru kingdom be also prosperous? The Khandavaprastha region is yours.'

"How cleverly and cunningly he drove us into the forests! If there were no Krishna on our side, that place would not have excelled Hastinavati in pomp and glory. Krishna’s enthusiasm for building the new never waned. The blind old one sent us off to the Khandava forest with soft words. It was father-in-law, Drupada, who sent us rich jewellery, horses, chariots, cows, bullocks, utensils, garments, and blankets. And how much did Krishna send from Dwaraka! It seems Krishna’s folk, the Yadavas, had grown rich and prosperous, living on the sea-shore and doing lucrative commerce with foreign lands beyond the seas. Dwaraka’s wealth far exceeded that of Hastinavati.. Well, we journeyed to Khandavaprastha, five brothers, mother and Krishna, and Draupadi, with great enthusiasm. On the very day we set foot there, Krishna, I, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva, surveyed the land, to decide on the portions of the forest to be cleared for cultivation and habitation. We went on horses. How could one sit idle when so much work lay before one? It was summer, and trees and plants stood dry and shrivelled up. We lit the area then at one end, the fire spread rapidly, belching black smoke, covering all space. As the yellow flames raged, birds, insects, snakes, scorpions, lizards and chameleons were burnt, and larger animals like the tigers and the bear fled. I had never seen such furious fire. As the

summer wind, raising dust, blew, the fire ran with it. That's my idea of a war. Duryodhana, his army, his horses, chariots and elephants should stand like a dried up forest in summer. As soon as flaming arrows penetrate them from different directions, they should all be burnt to ashes like the Khandava forest. They should become black cinders, like the bodies of that tribal woman and her five sons did. In the centre Duryodhana, surrounded by Dussasana, Karna, Sakuni, and the rest of their kith and kin. The blind fellow wouldn't be there in the battle-field, as he cannot come." Bhima began to yawn at this point. He relaxed his body. Some of his companions were asleep, and the others were sitting on the river-bank, letting their feet into the water. They were all chatting. The moon, having inundated the sky with its light, was floating in it. He felt now that it was wise to have rested there that night. He yawned a second time, but sleep wouldn't visit him. Memories of nothing else but Indraprastha haunted him, keeping him awake. How much labour and trouble had gone into the building of that city! Hadn't it been a tremendous work for the cultivators who had accompanied us from Hastinavati and turned into gold the land, after demolishing forest, raising a new human settlement, giving it a name? Bhima thought, "We didn't get that land just for the asking. The blind fellow didn't give it to us as charity. Though it was officially the property of the Kurus, it was actually in the possession of the Naga tribe. Our arrival, it seems, had provoked them. How could they rest content when they saw their forest in flames? They rushed out of the burning woods. With poison-tipped arrows. If they pierced the body, the poison would work, even if the arrows were physically removed. The whole population, men and women, were out with their bows and arrows. We lacked an army to counter them. We were five, plus Krishna. A few horses and chariots and men, all borrowed from the Panchalas. The reinforcements from Krishna had not yet reached us. We had no armour-plates. Did the blind fellow send us on purpose, anticipating rightly that the Nagas would rush against us, hoping that they would kill us? Nothing to beat Krishna's courage and high spirits. He ordered us to reverse the direction of our horses. 'Immediately', he said. We wore our armors, evaded the armed tribal group, went to the rear of the forest. Then from four sides, no eight, no, from all sides, we set fire to the forest. The directionless wind blew the wild flames everywhere. Ho, ho, ho! From which side could they find their escape? Some who rushed into the fire to save their folk, themselves got trapped in the flames. Some who were trying to get out of the raging flames found our arrows ready to kill them. How many died? Who knows the count? Krishna's brain is incredibly sharp and quick. If we had failed to set fire on all sides simultaneously, we would surely have been finished. The Nagas wouldn't have left us alive. How many were there inside the flames, who could have come out in thousands like bees and invaded us? And how many were we? They were six hundred or may be seven.

Not all males. Some of them could get away. Of course, this was because we had not lighted the side towards the river. Those who escaped, ran away, crossed the river and saved their lives. They are believed now to be roaming everywhere, proclaiming the Pandavas to be the chief enemies of the Nagas. It seems Duryodhana has sent his messengers to other Naga tribes, cashing in on their hostility to us. The messengers relay one message, 'I am waging a war against the Pandavas. Come and join my party. You will now have an excellent chance to take revenge on them. I shall give you the opportunity to decapitate them arid see their heads roll on the ground'. What name other than mine shall I take if I fail to decapitate you, Duryodhana, and kick your severed head with my left foot, you Duryodhana now collecting our enemies on your side? What other name should I take? I couldn't say. This was my only name. It was not one that was deliberately chosen. It was a name that came out of the mouth of my father Pandu, as soon as he saw the length and size of the new baby." Bhima wondered within himself who could force him to change his name. He felt like flexing his body. Tightening both his fists, he tried to bend his forearms. Then his attention shifted to his right arm. Bhima felt he was getting old. He found the arm which had been stone-hard earlier, its muscles taut and tough, looked now quite loose and flaccid.

Bhima reflected, "Yes, the twelve years of exile have taken their toll. There was no assurance of daily hunt and meat. Further the sages who came to discuss lofty Vedic matters, with brother Dharma, had to be fed. We had no milk, no yogurt, no ghee. No fried grain, no proper wheat-cakes, no cooked rice. How can Bhima remain not flaccid? Had Draupadi not taken care, it would have been worse. Mother put my hand in hers, and said, 'Take good care of his stomach. The rest will be all right.' If I had not become a cook in Virata city, I would have starved to death. Dharma would not have thought of fighting. He would have got back to the forest. His devoted brother, Arjuna, would have followed him. Nakula and Sahadeva, well, they would have done the same. What about Krishne? Krishne, remember, this Bhima is not dead. I and you do not have different aspirations. You are not enamoured of becoming a chief queen. I know you live now only to see me kick with my left foot the decapitated heads of Duryodhana, his brothers, Karna and Sakuni. Believe me, I shall not die without providing you with that spectacle. Even if Yama himself, the God of death, were to come, I shall not let him take you with him." Then his body relaxed, and he took off to sleep. Those sitting on the bank of the river got up one by one and went to sleep. A little distance away from him, Bhima heard loud snoring. Then there was the droning sound of the cicadas. Bhima said to himself, "Now nobody seems to be living in Indraprastha, it is no longer the capital of a kingdom. Soon after we left, all the Vedic

experts, actors, musicians, the elephant keepers, and soldiers, who had been with us, all deserted the city. The place is once again a village. The forest has re-conquered the city, and Duryodhana may return it to the Nagas. Alas, it used to be the most beautiful city in the Aryan world, lovely parks surrounding the assembly hall. Where was Mayasura heading through the Khandava forest? The land he was going to visit was supposed to be beyond the Gandhara country. He had left his homeland in search of livelihood, for Girivraja, ruled by Jarasandha. Poor fellow, he got trapped in the raging flames. Krishna was about to shoot an arrow at him as he was fleeing from the fire. Discovering in time that Mayasura did not look like a Naga, Arjuna persuaded Krishna to refrain from shooting. Or else Mayasura would have died most certainly. But that celebrated builder and designer of cities, fortunately, survived, to help us create the splendid and glorious city of Indraprastha. He went closer to Arjuna and asked him, 'You have saved my life. Who are you?' Arjuna replied, 'I am a younger brother of the king of this land. My name is Arjuna.' He said, 'You have saved my life. What do you want from me in return?' Arjuna asked, 'But what can you do? Who are you? Why did you come here anyway?' He answered, 'An architect. A builder. I can build structures more beautiful than any now in this country. I can design a beautiful city.' Krishna's sharp brain seized the advantage of the situation. It seems the planning of cities and the construction of buildings in his Dwaraka are superior to those in this part of the country. Krishna told him, 'Look here, architect, we want to create a new city here, raise new buildings. We shall provide you with the men and material you ask for. Can you use all your intelligence and expertise and build a city without its equal anywhere?' Well, Maya stayed back with us. Krishna got some more architects from his own Dwaraka. Within a year the building process began. This wasn't to be another Hastinavati with its narrow lanes. It was to have storeyed houses, with a bath-room in every house, and public baths in select places in the city. Baths containing ponds, surrounded by brick walls, and the outer rings filled with shade-giving trees. It was to have an excellent drainage system. It wasn't to be like Hastinavati, where if it rained heavily the water would inundate the lanes, islanding houses, breeding mosquitoes and flies, exuding foul smell. What wide streets Indraprastha could boast of? There would be enough space for the traffic — in fact some margin was left to allow even two carts from both sides to cross. At the end of the straight, level plane of the city, devoid of ups and downs, there was a new type of smithy where metals could be smelted." Thinking of the iron-smiths, Bhima remembered the clanking made by the smithy's hammers as they hit the hot metal in the evening prior to their departure from Upaplavya city. In the morning they actually left, they passed two carts but didn't recognise them as belonging to the smiths. Bhima couldn't sleep. He remembered those years brimming with life. The

intervening ten years had seen all sorts of things occur. He got up, unable to get sleep. All round, there was a cool moonlight, comforting to the eyes. And the white sand. He felt like sitting close to the waters. He stood up. All the other riders were asleep. The two chosen to keep vigil were kindling a fire a little distance away. Alone, Bhima moved on the sand slowly step by step. The water felt very cold. He sat away from the water but close enough to let his feet dangle in it. It was silent and still water. He felt like drinking it. Then he scooped several palmfuls of water and drank and gave a long sigh. The city lay on this very bank further up, a distance of day's or two days' journey. What happened then? He recalled it all gradually, bit by bit. He pieced it together. Not sequentially. No the items came bunched." After the forest was burnt, the Nagas were expelled, the fire spread like mad. Wasn't it fifteen days later that the servants could force their way into the forest, and hack at the stumps of trees left unburnt? After the trees dried up, once again fire, then smoke, ash and heat. That year the rains were somewhat delayed. Even if it rained well, how could one enjoy its fruits the same year? If we had not received supplies from Panchala, we and fellow settlers would have had to starve. Wasn't it the following year that we could harvest the crop? And what a splendid crop it was! It was so rich that plants bent low because of the heavy yield! No sooner did the news of this excellent crop spread than the relations of the settlers rushed to the site. Thus Indraprastha became a town overflowing with men and life. Of course, it had not yet been named Indraprastha. It used to be known as Khandavaprastha. It hummed with life. Carpenters, stone-dressers, brick-makers, mortar-makers, potters, sculptors; building-designers, chariot-makers, cattle- raisers and cultivators. More than enough work for every one. With what excitement and zeal they set about their tasks! The enthusiasm generated by the act of creating new things! Old towns had reputations but new ones had facilities. This was how everyone then felt and this was what everyone said. What wide streets, comfortable baths, clean houses! No building was allowed without the express sanction of the architect, Maya, and without the supervision of the architects from Dwaraka. No foundations could be dug, walls raised, without his prior approval.

"Every street looked like a royal road. When the new town was completely built, with the last structure, the assembly hall, completed, there was a general feeling that the old name, Khandavaprastha, should be discarded, and the new name, Indraprastha, was enthusiastically accepted by all. And Krishne's womb delivered all male issues, one after another. Every birth made all of us jubilant — mother, Dharma, I, Arjuna, Nakula, Sahadeva, and Krishne herself, bearer of the children. The children were named Prativindhya, Srutasoma Srutakirti, Satanika and Srutasena. Mother never tired of fondling and kissing the grand-children. She

never got tired of showering praise on the daughter-in-law who went through the repeated acts of delivering children, readily sleeping with her five husbands with unwavering enthusiasm. Krishne's womb was all fertility. After marriage Krishne's menstruation was never wasted. Not even after a delivery. Conceptions followed with regularity, with no menstruation wasted. How much the children had taken to me, and how much their life woven into mine! How they would rush to play on my lap! They would be all over me, my back, my shoulders and my head. In fact, in their mind I remained the only father. The other four were fathers, true, but not in the sense I was." Bhima laughed as he recalled how he would carry single-handed the five kids to this very Yamuna river and throw them into the water pooled on the sandy bank. The laughter was so face-splitting that its ache brought Bhima back to the present. There was total silence everywhere. No sound of birds. No droning of insects. He lifted his head to gaze at the sky, finding the moon moving westwards. It must have been considerable time after mid-night. He remembered that Neela had suggested that they should leave the place very early in the morning. Reluctantly he took his feet out of the water, and wended his way slowly back his foot crumpling the sand. Then he slept.

However hard he tried to sleep, Bhima's mind was still entangled with the memory of Indraprastha. It was the most beautiful city in the whole Aryan land. A new city. With a new imposing assembly hall. Had not Maya himself paid them a tribute? He had said openly that it was possible to acquire the services of skilled architects, but there were no kings like them, who could supply all the material requirements of such artists. It was such an extraordinary city. It more than fulfilled Dharma's expectation that its celebrated assembly hall should be visited by distant rulers, by priests who roamed everywhere to spot and praise great objects and events, and by Brahmins. Dharma was keen that they should witness the glorious accomplishment of Pandu's sons whom Duryodhana had been ceaselessly plotting to kill. He, the eldest of the sons of Pandu, was on the throne, but enthusiasm had invaded all of them. The common people were keen that their city should become famous everywhere. But how could this be best done? The solution was to perform the Rajasuya ritual. In that connection Krishna had been sent for. After his arrival, the first blow was to fall on Jarasandha, and that from Bhima. At this point, Bhima felt like turning to the other side. He started to yawn. After yawning came sleep. A cool wind was blowing. In his ears lay a silence of self-awareness. One by one, his ears, his nose, his eyes, and his skin sank deep into the sleep that filled him.

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Chapter

15

THEY all got up early the next morning. Though nobody awakened him, Bhima woke up on his own. They had not planned to journey long that day. They had decided to reach the borders of the forest and then camp overnight. The journey into the forest was to start only the next morning. Beyond the river, the land was dense with trees. There was very little cultivable land. Villages were few and far between. Right from the morning when they had started off, Bhima's mind was filled with the thought of the children. Back in Indraprastha he used to play daily with them. In winter he would let them play on the sandy bank, and in summer he would push them into the full water. He remembered how whenever the kids saw him, they would climb all over his body with joy, dancing. At the time of Rajasuya, Prativindhya had just completed nine years. The rest were eight, seven, six and five, respectively. The eldest never stayed away from Bhima, calling him lovingly, 'Father'. Bhima thought to himself "When Dharma lost the kingdom in the game of dice and when Krishne decided to send the children to her parental home and not let them accompany her in exile, it was to me that the children came, embracing me and crying, 'Father[7]. We were to be separated from them for the next thirteen years. I didn't cry when we lost the kingdom. But leaving the children was something I couldn't endure. My wrath against Dharma who was standing near-by, head bent, became intensified. But now the children have changed. Why have they become so strange? They have been in Upaplavya for nearly four months. Yet they do not display the familiarity they used to. They seem to lack the zest for life usually associated with Ksatriya children. They looked so listless and so unnaturally quiet. Why have they become like this? When I pulled Prativindhya close and embraced him, all he did was to bow to me respectfully. He stood, head bent. Very obedient. No winsome smile blossomed on his face. He was a young man of twenty-four. The rest were no better. What has come over them? Didn't Drishtadyumna take proper care of them? Was his wife indifferent?" Though it was pretty late in the morning, the sunlight did not appear, perhaps unable to penetrate the dense foliage. His body sweated wildly. But because of the cool breezes it was not uncomfortable. Though there were few trees, they

were gigantic. Bhima overheard Neela telling someone, "It looks like there is a village ahead. We should make enquiries there." Bhima felt that growing children should not be away from the father; otherwise they would grow into strangers. He felt that at last he had found the solution to thè problem that was tormenting him, and his mind was taken up with it. His mind went on repeating that children would become strangers. He thought to himself, "Drishtadyumna is no doubt a great warrior. Yet I myself should have taught the children archery and warfare. Taught them to train the body by sweating it through strenuous exercise after good feeding. Such exercises could have included swordsmanship, club-fighting, use of spear and axe. But unfortunately none of the five children had the body-build necessary for learning club-fighting. Did their grandfather's household lack nutritious food necessary for the growing children?" Bhima became angry. He thought of them contemptuously as people who did not know how to eat. Their direction was changing to the left. The sun was sharper on the right as the landscape was bereft of trees. A herd of white cows passed them. The dogs accompanying the herd began to bark at them. They were all overwhelmed by the sight of so many horses and riders, and went away. The cows were not scared. The cowherds took them to one side and guided them. Neela called them to enquire about the route to the Rakshasa land. He learnt that the boundary of the forest would be yet some twelve miles to the left of the village ahead. The cowherds did not give any further information. It seemed that they never went that side to graze their cattle. They also said that the village they were about to reach was the last. The procession of the horses with their riders began again. As they had moved a little beyond that village, it occurred to him suddenly. There would have been no lack of good and nutritious food in Drupada's household. Bhima recalled the rich feasts they had been regaled with after the marriage to Draupadi. He remembered particularly how Drishtadhyumna was appreciative of his capacity for consuming food. Yet the children had only the physique fit for learning archery, not for the arts of direct body-fighting such as wrestling and club-fighting. They were not worthy of Bhima. He saw that they were not like him in height or body-build. In fact they rose hardly upto his shoulders. They were more like Dharma, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva. He said to himself, "What kind of wrestlers can they become!"This struck him as a new thought. The horses slowed down in pace. His horse moved slowly weighed down by his body.

They stopped before noon. The morning shadows were still elongated. A densely shaded forest had just begun. There was very little heat. Trees were so tall that one had to lift one's neck to have a glimpse of their tip. Beneath their shady protection grew lush green plants, creepers and shrubs. They looked like green roofs stretching

for miles. Far away and between the trunks of trees and creepers they could see a range of boulders. Bhima remembered now that the boulders marked the boundary of the land of the Raksasas. Was it southward? Yes, Bhima thought. He remembered now. It was from this exit that they had left the forest and started moving aimlessly. It was on Krishna Dvaipayana's advice that they had journeyed to the town of Ekachakrapura. Thus triggered off, his memory began to revive, recalling the concrete details one after another — boulders, streams, ups and downs, the haunts of elephants, groves infested with birds' nests. The forest had remained the same. It had not been burnt and turned into cultivable land. This meant that the route remained intact and they could not get lost. Two persons were selected to do the cooking. The rest chose to dip in the cool water and scrub the horses till they shone. All of a sudden Bhima became gloomy and silent. It was decided to rest the whole day, half of them keeping watch while the other half slept, by turns. The following morning they were to resume the journey, with Bhima showing the way. They surmised that by noon they would reach their destination. Bhima thought, "Suppose even at this stage, we went back?" The very thought lightened his heart. Of course, he knew that there was no going back at this point. He recalled Krishna's wise saying that whether one personally liked or not, one must do certain things if one wanted to realise one's goals, win one's battles. He was reluctant but Dharma and Arjuna had forced him to undertake this mission. How could he now return empty-handed? He felt like snoozing till the meal was ready. He wondered, how would Salakatankati look now? Wasn't she of the same age as himself, more or less? What was her real age? Bhima realised that he had never asked her about it. And she had not volunteered. Bhima went deep into himself, "She was crazy about me. She had begged and wept. We wanted refuge. I lived with her. She was a woman fit for me. There was no woman in the Aryan land equal to her in height and size. Though she carried the fruit of my seed and was pregnant, it did not show because of her great height. She carried the big baby lightly in her belly. But the baby was big enough even at birth to cover my thigh. After all, it was Bhima's child. I was told that I looked like this at birth. In fact, this baby was even bigger than I was as a baby, mother said. I got very angry with mother. Why did she take me away from the big baby and its mother? Was it because she feared that if I had stayed longer, I would have become deeply attached to the baby and preferred to remain behind for good? She also did not handle that baby much. Never kissed it, fondled it. She pulled me away from the weeping mother and then saw to it that I left that land. Wicked, that was what she then appeared to be." His eyes closed slowly as sleep overtook him. The sense of depression was increasing every moment. But sleep soon engulfed him.

After a short while, Neela woke him up, saying, "Maharaja, the food is ready. Others won't eat until you have finished eating. Won't you get up and bathe?"

Bhima got up with a jolt. He walked slowly to the running water. It was cool and comforting to the body. He entered the water, submerged upto his neck. As he sat there, he was haunted by the memory of that child. He remembered dipping and bathing it in the water, then when it grew older teaching it swimming with a rope tied to its waist, dancing with the child on his back, saving half his own food to feed it, and... but that was not this child — it was Prativindhya, Srutasena, Srutakirti, Satanika and it was in the Yamuna, and it was on its sandy bank and in its waters that he had thrown the children as they shouted with glee, "Father, please do it to me again!"Bhima's stomach was wide, and she fed it to the fill with the meat of hunted animals, cooked roots and fruits, saying, "Your belly is big as that of a wolf! You are my wolf, my own wolf!"Bhima thought "How she kissed my belly, embracing it! That child may now have a belly as big as mine. She must have generously fed it."

Bhima sat motionless in the water, not scrubbing his body. Neela approached him and once again called him to dinner. Bhima stood up, and dried his body in the sun." I did not nurture him, bring him up as a son. I did not help develop his blood, muscles and bones. Wasn't it better to go back than to ask him to sacrifice that body I had not cared to nourish, sacrifice it in my cause, for my sake?" The thought haunted him when he sat to eat. After the meal, the party relaxed to doze off, leaving two of them to keep vigil. They slept in the cool shade. In a moment they were in deep slumber. After unrolling a mat for Bhima and supplying him with a bedsheet, Neela went to sleep. Though he fought against it, the body went to sleep, unable to resist the temptation of the cool shade. Bhima however could not sleep. His mind was pulling him away from the mission, but he found it impossible to ask his followers to return without accomplishing it. He got up after some time, and sat down. Then he stood up and walked on the ground dense with scattered foliage, towards the sprawling boulder in the north. It set the southern boundary to the land of the Raksasas. He climbed the boulder and sat down, still and silent, looking at the stretching landscape. Concrete details about the forest came back to him. He now knew that beyond the tall tree that reached the sky lay a grove of thorny bush. Turning to its left and crossing a stream, if one proceeded straight, one would reach the grove where Salakatankati resided. He surmised that if they started immediately, they would make it by the night. Once again he felt inwardly angry with his mother. Just then he sighted two Raksasas. They appeared to be of the same age as Bhima. They, too, saw Bhima. They fixed their gaze on him like tigers glaring at an enemy. They carried bows and arrows. Bhima knew that they might

without notice shoot their poison-tipped arrows. Suddenly recollecting the dialect of the Raksasas, he shouted, "Who are you? Come over here." They did not move.

Bhima, "Look here, I am one of you. Do you know Salakatankati?" The fear on their face lessened a bit. Bhima himself climbed down and moved towards them. They stood still, watching him come closer, unarmed, carrying no bow, arrows, club or wrenched branch, looking peaceful. Moving closer, Bhima asked them, "Who is your king?"

One of the two replied, "Ghatotkacha."

"Bhima, Where is Ghatotkacha's mother Salakatankati?"

Raksasa, "Right there, in the tree next to her son's."

Bhima, "You please go there right now and inform her that Ghatotkacha's father, Bhima, has arrived. Tell her he is camping on the other side of this boulder, and that he is here to see her."

One of them showed signs of recognition, and said, "Oh, yes! I now recognise you. Hasn't it been eight years and twenty now? Yes, I had seen you then. It was I who used to supply you daily fresh meat from hunted animals. Do you remember me, I am Raka?"

Bhima remembered. His memory was kindled. Yes, this was the man, but now half his teeth were gone!

Bhima, "How is Salakatankati?"

Raka, "After you left, she gave up meat, drink, roots and fruits, wasting herself. If the child had not been there, she might have perhaps starved herself to death! She lived only for that child." Bhima's heart melted, full of anguish. He was proud of her, of her love and loyalty. He felt that his coming here had not been in vain. Raka continued, "For two or three years she abstained from all male company." These last words suddenly deflated his pride. He wondered whether this meant that she took a man later, and what kind of man he could be. He sighed, What a woman!' He felt enraged, itching to get hold of that new man to strangle him. As he was gnashing his teeth, Raka added, "Even to this day she remembers you. Even now she weeps that you left her listening to the advice of your mother. She has been asking all these years, 'Can't he return just once?' Then she weeps. That was four or six years after you left. I shall report to her of your arrival. I am sure she will be so happy that she will reward me with an ankle-ring." He ran with his companion in one breath to give the glad tidings to the queen. They took the way Bhima was now re-constructing in his memory. The two vanished, passing by the sky-high Goni trees.

Bhima returned to the boulder and squatted on it. His mind was caught in whirlpools beyond his conscious control. A whole range of emotions invaded him — anger, contrition, humiliation, helplessness. The boulder was four times the height of a man. It was so capacious that, no matter which way the sun leaned, it did not let out even a palm-wide sunlight to reach beyond. Bhima lay on it, face upwards. He had no fear that, while asleep, some Raksasa would smash his skull with a stone club. His wrath was rising against his mother, but it was also turning against himself.

That night none slept soundly. From somewhere in the forest, a herd of elephants trumpeted. Now and then there was the snarling sound of tigers. But by midnight, Bhima himself slept soundly. After a short while he was awake. He heard the sound of drums coming from the direction of the boulder. They all awoke to that loud noise. The sound was moving closer and closer. Soon they saw torches waving. The torch-bearers climbed the boulder, and they stood together with the drummers, and others carrying weapons like bows-and-arrows, clubs, spears, and catapulting stones. This sight created a scare in Bhima's camp. Struck with fear the horses began to neigh without movement, and they started to champ and chafe. Bhima tried to put courage into them as he rose. He walked alone towards the boulder, but halted half-way. The drums ceased beating. Bhima shouted, T am Bhima. Father of Ghatotkacha. Who are you?"

Bhima's body-guards were astonished at the words, which sounded like their own language but intoned with a far higher pitch. There was also some difference in the order of words.

One person descended from the boulder, flanked on both sides by torch-hearers. Bhima fixed his gaze on the approaching figure. It was a mirror-image of Bhima himself, that new faced Bhima. May be he had been taller and of a larger body-build at this age, but the features of the face were unmistakably his own. It was a face that seemed ready to tear away branches from any tree and rush against any wild animal. Bhima whispered, "You must be Ghatotkacha!"The stranger came close and bent himself to touch Bhima's knees reverently with his head. Then four more youths climbed down from the boulder to move towards them. They carried torches, and their bodies were full-grown, Raksasa bodies. Yet they lacked Ghatotkacha's stature. They lacked the power to uproot trees and the strength of elephants. They, too, bowed before Bhima in the same fashion as Ghatotkacha. Ghatotkacha introduced them, "All these are my brothers." Then they all clustered round Bhima.

Ghatotkacha explained, "Mother started off to come here. But we told her that we would receive you and take you to her. You see, if she were to undertake the journey to and back from the boundary, her

legs would ache. Her power has now diminished."

It was decided that Bhima should go with them forthwith. But the king of the land, Ghatotkacha, was not agreeable to taking Bhima's party. He said, "You are my father. My mother's first husband. That means you are father toall of us. But these foreigners cannot be allowed to enter our land. It is contrary to our custom. Let them stay behind here. We shall leave behind some twenty of our men to give them protection. But these twenty will be located beyond the boulder on our side. They will see to it that no harm will come to your companions from wild animals or the Raksasas...."

After explaining the situation to Neela, Bhima left for the Raksasa land. When they crossed the boulders, Ghatotkacha sat on his knees before Bhima, saying, "Please sit on my shoulder." Bhima was in a fix. He refused to sit on his son's shoulder." Look, son, he said. I have always carried people on my shoulder, but I have never felt the need to sit on anybody's shoulder. Even now I am not so weak as to need such support."

Ghatotkacha was not to be put off easily. He answered, "Mother has ordered it. She has commanded that I must carry my father on my shoulder to her." Bhima wouldn't sit, but, equally adamant, Ghatotkacha wouldn't rise from where he sat. To Bhima's "no ", Ghatotkacha's answer was not to budge from the spot. He sat silent and motionless, like the royal elephant going down on its knees to help the king to climb on its back. The impasse ended when Bhima sat akimbo on his neck, letting the two legs hang from the shoulders. Ghatotkacha rose with his burden with absolute ease, and then began to gallop. The movement was so energetic and the pace so great that Bhima could not help thinking to himself, "Oh, how fast he runs! I am not sure if I myself had this kind of power at his age! No, no, I didn't have it!"Ghatotkacha deftly calculated the height involved and managed to push aside the branches that came in his way. His shoulders looked hard like seasoned wood. He had a chest appropriate for muscular arms and his forearms were powerful enough to produce an iron-clasp. All this enthused Bhima immensely. He forgot the ordeal of the long journey in summer, the forthcoming war, and the listlessness of so many days — forgot them in contemplating the prowess of his son's body. Ghatotkacha never stopped for even a moment, and never paused to breathe. And he never shifted the position of the person he was carrying to ease his burden. As he continued with the same great pace, sweat- drops began to drip from Bhima's own body. Ghatotkacha's body, too, produced its own sweat, sticky sweat. Thus the sweat of the carrier and the carried mingled. This experience made Bhima feel new currents of power run through him, as if he was a youth of thirty! His chest became swollen with a new sense of strength.

Before day-break they reached the grove of their residence. As soon as the sound of their arrival reached the grove, drums were beaten. Some eight or ten people began to dance. Beneath a tree, a fire was burning. Bhima now recognised the tree as the tree on which he and Salakatankati lived together as man and wife for one whole year in a bamboo nest. The tree had not grown much since then, and was recognisably the same. Soon Bhima sighted Salakatankati herself. She had become an old woman, and her body was sagging. Though fairly strong, her face showed wrinkles, and her hair had become scarce. Yet he could recognise her in a moment. Ghatotkacha stood before his mother. The trip over, he set Bhima down like an elephant, on his knees, and then withdrew his arms from the grasp of the knees. Before he stood up, Bhima bent down to press his nose against his son's head, and took three deep breaths.

As Bhima stood before her, Salakatankati clasped tightly his arms. Bhima felt that they showed the same old strength. Then she gently fondled his body, hands and face, with both her hands. Then suddenly she took a step back, beat his back with her fists some eight times. Her face became rough and her eyes turned red. Calling his name repeatedly, she closed her fists and hammered Bhima with them. He stood silent, head bent. Then she opened up her clenched fists and landed blow afterblow on his back and arms with great rapidity till the flesh became decorated with red weals. Yet Bhima did not stir even a fraction of an inch. Eventually she stopped beating him, and stood before him. Then she lifted his bent face with both her hands, and rooted her sight in his eyes. All of a sudden, her eyes were flooded with tears. She wept loudly, uttering his name, Bhima, repeatedly. Then once again she landed one hard blow on his right arm!

At that time, a young woman got down from the tree. She possessed the full-grown body of a Raksasa woman. It was a body larger than even a normal Raksasa woman's. Like other Raksasa women, she had a piece of animal-skin wrapped round her waist. Her full-grown, swollen breasts were naked, totally uncovered. Her throat, arms and legs were adorned with ivory ornaments. And she had shining stone beads. The previous day's garland round her neck looked ruffled and roughed. As she climbed down from the tree, she clutched a male child in her left arm. No sooner did he see her than Bhima realised that she must be Ghatotkacha's wife. And the child,his son's son. She moved close to Bhima and laid the child at his feet, and herself bent down, her face touching Bhima's knees. Bhima asked, "What is your name?"

"Karnakatankati "

Bhima picked up the child, so big that his hands could just about

manage to cover it. Reddish in complexion. The body-build of its father. Not more than three or four months old. He clasped the young thing to his chest and passed his hand gently over its back. He asked, "What is the name?"

"Barbaraka ", the mother answered.

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Chapter

16

BHIMA was feeling exhausted. He wanted to take a bath. He recalled that there was a small pond opposite to the grove. He said, "I want to bathe." Salakatankati followed him, saying, "Let's go. I shall go with you." On the way, she did not say anything. It was bright daylight. Beneath the dense foliage, it was difficult to make out the time. Near the pond there were some thirty to forty Raksasas. They had gone there to perform their morning ablutions. When they saw Salakatankati, they moved away from the pond. She plucked a neem stick and split it into two. She gave one piece to Bhima, and kept one for herself. Both began to brush their teeth with the neem twigs. Bhima was feeling somewhat embarrassed.

While brushing his teeth, he asked, "You have come with me. What would your husband say to that? Would he keep mum?"

She, "What other husband do I have?"

Bhima, "Does it mean you did not marry again? But Ghatotkacha showed me four youths as his brothers."

Salakatankati did not answer him immediately. She cast away the neem twig, washed her mouth and face. Then she came, close to Bhima. Holding his hands, she spoke, staring into his face, "Our custom permits a wife to re-marry if a husband absconds for a year, as such a husband is taken to be as good as dead. And did you promise me that you would return? Yet, I waited for you, for four long years. Would the Raksasas tribe tolerate it if their queen did not produce many children? Yet, I never married anyone else. I just cohabited with a man, and four children came out of it. That's all."

Bhima was silent, his head bent low. Then he freed his hands from hers. After a while, he threw away the neem twig, and washed his mouth. After that he plunged into the water to swim. Never looked in her direction. He swam silently, his hands and legs submerged. He moved forward. The first wave he faced soon subsided. Then there was placid water in which he began to glide, very much by himself. Then he heard Salakatankati's shout, "Just turn this way." She too was swimming towards him. Bhima slowed down to let her catch up with

him. Nearing him, she said, "You had given no word that you would return. Therefore you may say, T broke no promise', and evade the issue smoothly. It seems you five brothers spent twelve years in exile in the forest after losing in a game of dice. If you had to spend twelve years in a forest, you could have spent them in our forest as well. Isn't this forest enough? Then why didn't you come here? Did your mother block you? I had never disobeyed your mother, and never did anything to bring dishonour to her. Then tell me, why didn't she accept me?"

Bhima, too, wondered, "Why hadn't they done it?" His mind asked this question from the depth of a silence, a silence like that of the motionless water in the pond. The idea of returning to this forest had never occurred to him. Was it because of Krishne's company? No, no... the question of why it didn't occur to him ate into his mind like a worm. He felt ashamed. She did not speak. Bhima simply began to float without swimming. After a while, she said, "You look very tired. From how far have you come? How many days' journey? Your unsupported legs are not able to keep you afloat. Swim back to the shore. I shall scrub your body." She moved close and pulled him towards the bank. He mechanically followed her. She made him sit on a Slab, and using a pebble specially chosen for the task, she scrubbed him hard — the chest, shoulders, arms and back. She washed away the dirt coming out of the scrubbing with water. Then making him stand, she scrubbed thoroughly his thighs, knees and feet. Her body had not been so dirty. It did not need any scrubbing. Just drying it after dipping in the water was enough. They both went back to the grove. The sun had been up for some time, casting shadows three men's length, and filtering his light through the gaps between the branches. Her body drying in the sun shivered mildly with cold.

Standing before the tree where they had earlier lived in the bamboo house, she told Bhima, "Climb." Bhima climbed. But he realised that he had lost the ability to climb the tree with ease. Salakatankati, however, followed him effortlessly. After negotiating some height, Bhima pushed open the door of the nest and went inside. It was a sufficiently large bamboo nest. There was a soft grass-cushioned mattress, and the inner wall was decorated with designs in woven twigs. In one corner stood a big pot covered with a lid and two other pots. She noticed that his eyes had alighted on the pots. Moving closer and fondling his belly, she said, "Cooked meat of wild bison. Boiled roots, especially cooked for you by the daughter-in-law. When you were here, weren't you very fond of toddy made of palm? That is why Ghatotkacha has collected it from the tree specially marked for him. While we were out bathing, the children have arranged all this for your pleasure. You are the wolf-bellied one, aren't you?" Nuzzling closer and fondling his belly, she added, "My

wolf-bellied one! Ghatotkacha has your enormous appetite. The other children are useless in this matter."

He asked, "Where are the rest?"

She, "They have climbed into their nests, and are asleep. He had to run to the border and then carry you back. Karnakatankati also kept awake with me. She cannot resist sleep. We shall all join in the evening. Right now, eat your meal." Then she served him on the palm plate with two dishes. She filled the plate with large handfuls of them. Then she placed near him a wooden jar filled with the toddy that had not yet turned sour. He told her, "Join me." Then she ate from the same plate, and asked him, "Why do you hate the Raksasa tribe?"

He, "Who told you that?"

She, "It seems after leaving here you killed one of our tribe, Baka. Some ten or thirteen years later, you killed Baka's brother, Kirmeera. It can't be due to any taste for human flesh, because you do not eat it."

He, "Inordinately fond of human flesh, Baka plunged the whole kingdom into a terrible plight. We had to kill him to re-pay the debt we owed to people who had fed us. In order to avenge his brother, Kirmeera used to harass us in the forest every night. He was trying to kill us. How could we have survived without killing such a person?"

She did not say anything more. She did not eat much. But she went on feeding him with large handfuls of dishes. At last she opened her mouth,

"Do you know what has now happened? It seems you and your enemies will be locked in a battle of death. Wherever they are, all Raksasas are planning to gang up against you to kill you. Their wrath has focused on you alone. After all, who is there among your tribes who can challenge and confront the Raksasas, excepting you? Naturally, you are their sole target. Not your brothers. Raksasa chiefs from various forests had assembled here. They told us, 'You are one of the largest groups of Raksasas. Ghatotkacha has the calibre to lead the entire Raksasa population. You join us.' They were insistent that we join them to fight you. Of course, this fellow was prepared to join them with enthusiasm. Then I invited him up to my nest, and counselled him, 'He is your father. Though your brothers were born to another man, they, too, are his sons since he is my only husband.' He asked me why you did not care to visit him even once if you really were his father. Tell me, was he right in asking that question? Tell me yourself."

Bhima could not look her straight in the face. His eating also

stopped. He felt that he should not have come on this mission. No doubt there was so much joy in returning. Yet what answer could he give to this question which was tormenting him in one form or other? He heard the cry of a child from a tree. Bhima's ears caught that sound. His mind, too, turned in that direction. Watching this, she said, "Your grandson. He needs his mother only when he wants to be suckled. Otherwise he wants my thighs and arms to play with. If he does not get them, he will cry." Now Bhima lifted his face to look at her. She bornbarded him with questions, "Why did you stop eating? Did your belly fill up with so little? If you were to leave any cooked food uneaten, wouldn't your daughter-in-law mock me? She would say, 'you described your husband as a big wolf — you used to call him a wolf!' Bringing her hand close to my face, she would mock me, saying, 'this is the great belly, this famous belly of Bhima!'

Bhima resumed eating. She continued, "Now the Raksasa people are split into two factions. That day itself they threatened Ghatotkacha, saying, 'You were born to our enemy; we shall first finish you and your mother.' But it is not that easy to beat us here on our own ground. They said, Tie might have produced you. But commitment and loyalty to one's people is over-riding, understand rightly the Dharma.' They had tied him up in words. After their departure, he came to me, asked me, 'Tell me what I should do. Now I am not sure what is my Dharma. Tell me yourself, please,.." Her words were interrupted by the loud crying of the child on the neighbouring tree-top. In the groves where residential nests were located, birds were not permitted to build nests, because it was feared that birds' eggs might attract snakes. In the silence of the morning the child's screams spiralled up to the sky. The cooked roots which he had stuffed into his mouth appeared to get stuck in the throat. She muttered, "Now he will not stop crying. I shall bring him here." She went out of the door and quickly descended from the tree.

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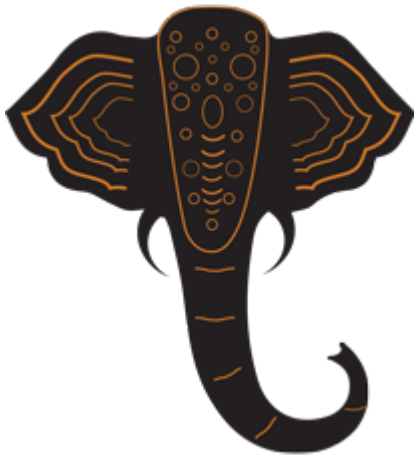
PART FOUR



Chapter

17

IN the morning, before Bhima departed, Krishne went to his residence to bid him farewell. It was a journey expected to be over in seven or eight days: Yet it threw her mind into a turmoil as if she had to face the separation for years! No, she did not weep. She did not show it on her face. Indeed she demonstrated a more than routine enthusiasm at the situation, even making fun of Bhima. She accompanied him upto the waters to the north. In the presence of Dharma, Arjuna,Nakula,Sahadeva, and her five children, she said, smiling gently, "Bhima, you wouldn't forget that you are my sole refuge and support, would you?" She had held his hand in hers while she said this. Despite all the put-on cheerfulness, the voice showed traces of the depths of anguish from which it had arisen.

After he disappeared from her vision with his horse-riding companions, she returned home with her servant-maids, and her five sons. The children who had been recalled at the end of the exile incognito, were not secluded in a separate residence. She let them stay in her own house. After thirteen-and-half years of separation, she fed them with her own hands. Surrounded by them she would ask them of the exploits of their maternal uncle Drishtadyumna and their grand-father Drupada. She would also narrate to them from time to time the story of her years in the forest, the tribulations suffered, punctuated by more happy episodes. The five children showed a remarkable sense of unity. They were always together, whether they sat round their mother or went out of town to practise lessons in archery or in doing everything else. They functioned like a distinctive group. Maybe because they were new to the place and had no friends among local peers, or because they did not fully grasp what was going on around them. The fathers were immersed in the preparation for war. They were deeply engaged in journeys to foreign lands in search of military alliance, the sending of emissaries abroad, mutual consultation, and attending to the problem of resources — material and equipment needed for warring, that were pouring from friendly countries and kingdoms. Only Abhimanyu, their brother was there in their age group. Of course, he was not exactly of their age, being three years younger than the youngest of the five, Srutasena. Not much intimacy existed between him and

them. They had not grown together. After the commencement of their fathers' exile when they were shifted to their uncle's place, the eldest, Prativindhya, was eleven, and the youngest, Srutasena, was six. Abhimanyu was three. As a child Abhimanyu lived with his parents in a separate residence. Only Prativindhya and Srutasena remembered Abhimanyu. The others did not have any recollection of him at all. It was not likely that three-year old Abhimanyu could have relations with his elder brothers. It was not surprising, therefore, that they did not become intimate with each other. Immediately after the exile, Abhimanyu, just turned sixteen , was married to equally young, Uttara, daughter of king Virata. The couple lived in a house of their own in Upaplavya city. Next to them lived their parents, mother Subhadra and father Arjuna. He was better in archery than the other five. He had inherited his father's deft fingers and sharp eyes. His father would even now attend occasionally to his archery training, teaching him how to position the bow, how to take aim, and how to handle different types of arrows. The other five, standing close by, would also get his instruction. But, unlike Abhimanyu, they could not approach him easily when they failed to understand some technical point. They were unable to understand why they couldn't do this. Prativindhya, the eldest, often pondered over this matter.

While feeding the five children with her own hands, Krishne thought." The eldest is twenty-four, the second twenty-three, and at least they should have been married by now. They should have been saddled with wives. It seems in the immediate future there are no Svayamvaras in the offing. Or which king would be ready to offer them brides, when their parents, bereft of their kingdom, roamed the forests in exile? 'Child, Prativindhya, why do you eat so little? Would your father, Bhima, tolerate children eating such skimpy food? He would scold you if he saw this'. How delicate they have become! God knows when, if ever, we will win back our kingdom and get them married! Even here there are so many servant-maids to wait on them. They do not raise their eyes to look at any of them..."Krishne felt gratified at the last thought, that her sons were not like other princes.

The youngest, Srutasena, hesitated to come to her when they first arrived there. He did not recognise her. When she herself went to him, and tried to embrace him he managed to get away from her shyly. When she asked him for the third time whether she was not his mother, he had simply said, "Yes, I know." She asked him, "Then why don't you come closer to me?" He had no answer. He would work up anger for no reason. But no w he was the one closest to his mother. He would be constantly around her, muttering, "Mother, mother." And he was nineteen! What kind of wife can be fixed for this stupid one! He was still like a baby. He did not understand things the others could. She thought, "How warm it is today! So early in the

day, too. It is hot like a frying pan. This Matsya land is like this. Barren hillsand no forests, very little water, and plenty of heat. One should run away to the mountains when summer comes. At least take refuge in a hill." She remembered that they had visited the Himalayas at least for four summers. She called, "Jyotishmati." The servant-maid came to take her orders. She said, "Jyotishmati, soak the Lamanca mat and roll it down. It is getting very warm. Bring a fan." Thirty-year old Jyotishmati covered the doors and windows with the Lāmanca mats after sprinkling water over them. The air cooled down and everyone felt as if life came back to them. But it took quite a few minutes to cool down. It was better in the forest. However, no warm winds would be blowing there. Krishne guessed that Bhima must have by then travelled some sixteen miles. But was there any horse that could run so fast? One could whip it to make it gallop. Perhaps he is in a hurry to meet his first wife... the idea made her laugh. Had she said this to his face, he would have been beside himself with rage! She said to herself - "Let him return. TH say this again and again till he turns mad with rage!"Then she shouted, "Jyotishmati, where are the kids?"

Jyotishmati, "Haven't they gone for archery class? They are learning the art of fighting from the chariot."

Krishne, "It is so sultry. Outside the sun is so hot."

Jyotishmati did not reply .'There was nothing she could have said, and the war was drawing closer. It was their own war. She said to herself, "Heavens forbid that our children should shrink from it from fear. Thank God, none of them was like that arch coward, Uttarakumara! If one had such cowardly children, one would not be in a position to raise one's head in honour. Srutasena is like a child in other matters, but his aim in shooting arrows is deadly accurate. His arm has the power to shoot the arrows so fast that they can hardly be seen! And my elder brother, what a man! The Panchalas hail from a manly clan. My brother is the son of king Drupada. When he instructs, not only the aiming skill but spirit and courage will also develop. Moreover none of their fathers are pusillanimous. Even the eldest father, Dharma, is no coward. By now may be they would have covered another four miles. Will they remember Krishne on their journey or would Krishne be an unlucky one? What happiness have I got out of life so far? All the way, it has been uninterrupted misery, filled with road-blocks, nothing but sorrow. Even at the zenith of Pandava glory — the Rajasuya rite they performed after building Indraprastha. Who can fathom the inner anguish of this Krishne? Not even the mother-in-law. I had imagined Bhima as my only refuge and hope. Has the time now come for losing even that one source of hope?" She recalled the twenty-six years of her married life with him." Yes, Bhima alone was worthy of my trust. Capable of deep love.

My belief that none else is like him has not changed to this day. Well, it has to be seen whether it would continue in the future. If it doesn't continue..."The very idea brought tears to her eyes. But Krishne was not the one to cry in the open. She returned to her rumination, "Even if I have to cry, it would never be in his presence. He asked me not to show my face to him. Well, he will learn." As she felt that her own obstinacy was stronger than his, she gained greater self-confidence. With it came the strength to endure the sultriness.

The coolness of the water sprinkled over the Lamanca mats was now spreading all over the chamber." It is supposed to be a relationship struck some twenty-eight years ago. An accidental one, too. It seems she took the initiative and became infatuated with him. How I wish we had such freedom to fall in love! It lasted for a year. The first marriage took place twenty-eight years ago. Relations with a Rajasuya tribe. There was no palace. Not even an ordinary house. Not even a hut on the ground. A bamboo-nest up in the tree! It was the madness of youth. But suppose the old connection forgotten during the twenty-six years of married life with Krishne, were to blossom again. No, Bhima is far too dependable a person to dump me. If Bhima's faithfulness were to collapse, then the world would be windless and desolate. Clouds won't form and rain won't fall." Just then a nice breeze blew from the outside, and it felt cool as it passed through the Lamanca mats. The breeze brought the sound of the hammer in the smithy. Even in this heat, the furnace in the smithy was busy. How many were there working? At least two, one to hold the hot metal and the other to hammer it. There were two carts. When we had gone to see Bhima off, there was a woman near there, who was vomiting." How old could she be?" she asked herself. That reminded Krishne of her own days of pregnancy and vomiting. It appeared to be ages since she last conceived. Nostalgically she leaned against the wall and felt comfortable as its coolness touched her. She wondered, "How far would he have covered by now?" The sun outside was fierce. And now his hair was thinning, exposing his head to the heat. Yet he refused to wear a protective head-gear. He was against all restraints on his body. Wanted it to be free flowing. He was, she felt, not a sensitive person who knew what to say when, and what not to say when. She recalled that after she had spent the night with Dharma^ marrying him first, she was technically married to Bhima next, and spent the next night with him. How different he was from Dharma. Totally uninhibited and no gestures of ignorance and confusion. He went to work directly, seizing her body, clasping her like a child, tossed her upto the ceiling and caught her in his arms. It was so violent that she feared for her life! She had wondered whether he took her to be a play-thing. When she screamed in terror, he held her, asking her, "Are you scared? Why?"

She had said, pulling a long face, "Because you do all this!"

Bhima, "Salakatankati would have been thrilled with joy if treated like this. She would have been so happy she would urge me to repeat the action. If I hit her, my fists would bounce back, so tough she was!"

"Who is this Salakatankati?"

"My wife. The first one. Belonged to the Raksasa people." Then he told her everything, adding, "What incredible power and strength! No Aryan woman of ours can match her. Look how my muscular arms bulge. She possessed such big, powerful arms. Her embrace would be so tight that it was impossible to get out of it. She had such a big body that she could carry even a husband like me on her shoulders and walk with ease for four miles! In height, she came up to my shoulder. That means, as tall as an average Aryan male. Not like you." Krishne then reflected, "Crude fellow. He can never be sensitive to the nuances of a woman's delicate emotions and moods. He can never transcend the level of simple and direct feeling." Bhima had continued in the same strain, "Yet look here, Krishne, that's your name isn't it? Well, let me call you Krishne, not Panchali or Ginchali. No doubt there is some point in calling a wife with the name of her father's land. But somehow I feel such a name suggests remoteness, distance. Look, Krishne, Salakatankati fell in love with me. At first I could not respond to her emotionally. It was mother who forced me to live with her. Once I had a taste of her gorgeous body, I became its slave, craving for it. With you, it is so very different. As soon as I saw you in the Svayamvara hall, my heart just melted in a moment. Even to this day I cannot understand why. Was it your beauty? Your complexion? As you know, your complexion is not all that fair and white. Yet, you captured me, yes totally. Why? I can't say."

In the early days of their marriage, he mentioned Salakatankati's name frequently, and very often without rhyme or reason. Suddenly he would insert references to her — her body-build, her strength. Obviously, she thought, the wrestler in Bhima was after power and strength in a woman. Yet he was attracted to her, Krishne, but without any comprehension. Her inner thoughts began to flow, "He was a child, a boor, who didn't know how to talk to a woman. That brother of his, Arjuna, now he is a great one to talk to women. His skill in handling a woman was as great as his skill in archery! The same deadly accuracy of aim! He was so clever that every word he spoke meant one more step deeper into her heart! You were drawn irresistibly towards him by the sheer magic of his words. In the Svayamvara hall, he proved to be the most skilled archer in all Aryavarta. So he won his bride, me. His grip was sure even when he was trying to bend a metal bow. And how handsome! Sharp nose, dimpled cheeks, pellucid blue eyes, and clean white complexion. Yes, in his presence I appeared literally Krishne, the dark one. His gait was firm and noiseless. His fingers were good not only at archery but

also at the delicate handling of musical instruments. When they had all attacked father to take him bound as fee for their teacher, my father had been captivated by Arjuna's attractive demeanour which was a blend of gentleness and toughness. His physique was perfectly proportioned, every part of the body balancing every other part to produce harmony. Even such a person was shaking nervously, his fingers vibrating, as he came to the bed-room for me on the third night." She remembered the scene vividly. Even now. He had lifted her face gently with his delicate, trembling hands, and declared, "This Arjuna has come begging to be your slave. Will you grant him the favour, princess Draupadi?" Her initial defeat at this refined move had been followed by the later defeat in the bed. She thought within herself, "Arjuna, you won me completely with your very first move. You made Krishne feel on the very first night itself that none was more fortunate than she. I could suffer the other four husbands on the strength of the bliss you gave me! And suffered patiently and slowly! What great days they were! Days when all the five were anxious to be in my company, to stay with me, to fondle my flesh and chat with me. They were all freshly married husbands. They were all flawless youths. Then they were hungry for the wife's body. Such impatience! And one after another tumbled into my bed. But one each night. Four day's waiting would turn their bodies gluttonous for my body, inflamed with the desire to satisfy four nights' hunger in one night! The night-games in the bed with husbands by turn would exhaust me so much that I spent the whole of the following morning in sleeping. Bhima who had called me weaker than Salakatankati lacked understanding, judgement. How did gentle Krishne get the strength to manage the aggression of four husbands? Well, it puzzled me, too. I doubt if all women have such strength. It made me feel proud. My friend used to say, 'Mistress, your strength is matchless.' To tell the truth, every night in the heart of my heart I desired none but Arjuna. In the other four I was all the while searching for Arjuna, his features, his gestures, his action. The four Pandavas reached me only through my consciousness of Arjuna. I imagined them to be partial Arjuna s! I used to count moments as they rolled by only for Arjuna, as if the supreme goal of my life was blending my body with his body." Outside, the winds might have stood still. The Lamanca mat let in no breeze. She asked if it was the ringing of metal. No, it was perhaps the wind whistling elsewhere. The sound was indistinct. Inside, it was warm. And the discomfort of sticky sweat on the body. Krishne called, "Jyotishmati, fetch me a fan. No, not the one made of Lamanca grass. It is too heavy and stirs up very little wind. The palm-leaf fan is better." The servant-maid brought the fan and began to fan her, sitting by her side. Krishne felt positive relief. She felt the urge to take off the upper garment. But she merely loosened it. She wished the fanning would go on without stop. The whole room appeared to have been emptied. But as soon as the servant sat close to her,

Krishne lost track of her memory. She found it difficult to pick up the thread of thought. What was that she was thinking?" No, not that. No, not that either." She said to the servant, "Jyotishmati, I shall fan myself. Give it to me and leave." Jyotishmati replied, "I have already soaked the mats well enough to make them drip water. I have no other work right now. Let me fan." Krishne said, "No, no. Do as I say. Go away now. I want to be left alone." She grabbed the fan from the servant. The servant left for another part of the house. The room became even more empty. Silent. Unpeopled. Krishne's two eyes that contracted and dilated by turns, watched the silent room. Krishne asked herself as to how many miles Bhima would have travelled by that time. Outside, the sun was pouring down fiercely. Scorching sun. She wondered, would the horses move with equal pace in this heat? Suppose that wicked Duryodhana ambushed them with his killers. But Bhima had twenty body-guards to protect him. Even otherwise, no problem. Bhima did not need any body-guards. The person who could kill Bhima had yet to be born. When Duryodhana was destined to die at the hands of Bhima, killers were of no avail! He had slain so many Raksasas. Bhima had imprisoned Jayadratha, turned Kichaka into pulp in a hand-to-hand fight, defeated the whole lot of kings in the east and collected the Rajasuya tribute from them. That was Bhima, and killing him was impossible. Then, she said to herself, "Why scare oneself with imaginary dangers? By now Bhima should have gone twenty miles, at least. It was a journey of three or four days. After that Bhima might forget Krishne, Krishne might become helpless, looking to none for support. She would need no such support. She would be free. May be she would lean on her sons." She continued bitterly, "Let him stay behind with his Salakatankati. Let him even bring her back here..."

Just then a breeze blew in from the outside.

Inside the room, it felt cool and comfortable. She found the fan dispensable. She said to herself, "I know him for twenty-six years. He will never abandon Krishne. How can he survive without me?"

She followed her inward thought — "Yes, how can he five without Krishne's supporting hand? Bhima, can't you understand a woman's mind? Are you so dumb as not to see that it hurts a woman badly when her husband talks about another woman? I had asked him this. His reaction? He looked sheepish and lowered his head. But he did ask, 'Why should that produce sorrow in you?' But my words at last communicated to him their full meaning. Once he got the point of my words, he remained silent the whole night. Didn't touch my body. It was the last day. After that he never referred to her. Not only to her. I wonder if he ever gave a thought to any other woman. He was totally attached to me. When the rule was altered regarding my sleeping with five husbands by which each one of them lived with me for a

full year by turns, Bhima felt miserable to be away from me continuously for four years! He couldn't bear the loneliness. Even then he never thought about any other woman. Took no separate and exclusive wife for himself. How many young women did he bring as servant-maids, as part of the Rajasuya tribute! He never touched anyone of them. His is a one woman mind, his loyalty and devotion focussed on one woman. Without Krishne he just cannot live. A woman offers total surrender to a man's cleverness. But Bhima is not even aware of capturing other women with his cleverness and resources. Now Arjuna is a different kind of male. Arjuna, you succeeded in making me infatuated with you, winning my loyalty only to you, to none but you. But unable to go woman–less for four years and wait for me, you went after God knows how many women, enjoying their bodies. You went beyond this, and took a wife exclusively for yourself. Capturing the hearts of women became a technique, a skill, for you. You never could be loyal in this matter. But this Krishne became committed to enduring the five Pandavas, joining them together like the five fingers of her hand. Well, I have never wavered from my devotion and commitment to them to this moment. But you, Arjuna, you have lost the power to face me without embarrassment. No doubt, you are the best archer in the whole of Aryavarta. How did my life take a zigzag path? How happy I felt when my father decided to give me as a bride to the most famous archer in the Aryan land! Can a Ksatriya bride be won by anyone but the bravest warrior? After all, the daughter of king Drupada is not an easy-to-get prize! No, nothing short of the supreme skill in archery, the kind of skill that enabled one to bend the toughest bow and send the most accurate arrow, alone could have won me. My father is a Ksatriya who can appreciate bravery and prowess and worship them. He is a pure Ksatriya who will not hesitate to acknowledge the expertise in archery even if it belonged to an enemy. It behoves a Ksatriya to win his bride, not to beg for her. My father's words made my flesh tingle. I too was chewing them in a comer of my mind.

"Yes, it was over. Arjuna won. He bent the bow and took a most skilful aim, at both the targets. Krishne was cut off from her father's tree to fall into Arjuna's basket. All the kings of Aryavarta rushed to make-off with me. After all, which Ksatriya can retreat smiling after losing in a game? Is it in their blood? That, too, in the blood of an Aryan Ksatriya? They are all a race of gamblers. If they won a game, they would feel they have won the sky. Of them lose, they would turn into a violent, quarrelsome rabble, shedding their blood or other people's blood or both! Had father not anticipated this and kept ready his army to deal with the ensuing fracas, then this fruit that Arjuna and the five Pandavas had collected would have had God knows whose teeth bitten into it!

"Yes, it was over. Arjuna won. Took his bride home. And what a

house, the kind I had never set my foot in. It was a miserable hut behind the house of a potter in the southern section of our town! It was surrounded by earthen pots and containers of all kinds, new from the shaping wheel. Kept for drying in the sun. The floor was messy with soft wet mud. Thank God, inside the hut there was no such mud. It seems the hut had been built specially for their occupation. The Pandavas walked the princess they had won, on bare feet, as they had no chariot. As she walked through the street donning her dazzling ornaments, worn specially for the Svayamvara, were there spectators lacking to witness the procession? Men and women, old and young, rushed out of their houses of their princess or collected on the balconies to watch this odd spectacle. In the street, the entourage accompanying me, and Arjuna, surrounded by the other four Pandavas. Behind these, the overflowing crowds. They took me to the hut behind the potter's house. Arjuna called, 'mother'. Then he took me inside. He told her proudly, T have won it and brought it.'He asked her, 'You used to say that there is no woman suitable for me in the whole world. Isn't she beautiful?' His mother lifted my face with both her hands and looked at it. She had such large hands, big body- build, silver hair, a face oozing self-confidence, white garments, an upper cover, complete absence of jewellery — the very picture of dignified poverty. Passing her hands gently over my face, arms and back, she said, 'You are really beautiful. This son of mine thinks no end of himself as a handsome fellow. You have the beauty to puncture his conceit.' Then she embraced me most warmly. Well, my mother-in-law is big-hearted. Normally mothers-in-law are likely to be jealous of beautiful daughters-in-law. From that moment to this, this mother-in-law of mine has never regarded me as her rival. How she would spoil me with her solicitude, saying, Krishne, my Krishne, dress well, wear the best ornaments, eat well.' During the Rajasuya rites, when I went full clad and adorned to touch her feet and receive her blessings, she embraced me and said, tears in her eyes, 'Mine own child, whatever prosperity my sons have attained is due to you.' Well, I haven't seen her for thirteen and half years. How is she now! How much spent-out! Cheated of her sons, daughters-in-law and grand-children, cheated of her kingdom! Arjuna had told her, 'King Drupada had set up a bow that no Ksatriya of Aryavarta was likely to bend. But I bent it. And bent this girl, too, to obey your desire. I do not want to wait till that king comes to us with gifts and takes us to perform the marriage formally. You bless us with the simple words, 'marriage is over'...

"The huge-bodied Bhima, one fore-arm taller than Arjuna, who was standing next to him, intervened, 'Mother, this Arjuna might have bent the bow. But in such Svayamvaras, it is not enough to win the specific contest. It is not the end of the matter if the girl puts the garland of victory round the neck of the winner. Even when she does

this, would the Ksatriyas around remain passive? They employ force and guile, and rush against the winner of the contest. Well, today also this happened. Duryodhana and his comrades had also come or the Svayamvara. As soon as they realised that it was Arjuna who had successfully bent the bow, they all rushed to abduct the girl and take her away for themselves. Basking in the glory of having won the contest, Arjuna did not comprehend what was really taking place around him. He was totally absorbed in the idea that thousands of eyes were focussing on him, the hero, the victor, in admiration and envy. I suddenly sprang forward to seize the arm of the girl and pulled her back. Then I fell on Duryodhana. I picked up one of the pillars of the Svayamvara pandal and thrashed Karna and Dussasana. Because I had wrenched the pillar, the Svayamvara pandal collapsed. It created a real pandemonium. By that time Drupada's soldiers were alert to what was going on. In short, what happened was not simple, not one event but two—one, winning the bow contest, and the other, getting possession of the girl. Sure, Arjuna shone as an expert archer, but it was I who was the centre of the second event. Just look at her left arm, and see my finger-prints on it, made when I seized her and pulled her away from our enemies. See, it is still fresh and red. Therefore I claim her as my wife.'

"After this volley of words, none said a word. Absolute silence. But only for a moment. Then Arjuna hit back hard, 'She is to become your wife, your wife? Is that it?Drupada had announced that his daughter was to wed the warrior who would bend the bow. That was his wager and I won it. Of course, some rowdies intervened. Maybe as an elder brother you might have rushed to defend what was a younger brother's property. But on this ground if you now claim that the property belongs to you, let worms infest your tongue.'

"Bhima, not to be outsmarted, said, 'Do you imagine that all the rules of right conduct and moral life are the monopoly of your tongue? But for my intervention, that property would have been by now on its way to Hastinayati, at least twelve miles away. Perhaps you would have been happy if Duryodhana had got hold of her. You are not prepared to concede her to your own brother.' I did raise my head to see him. Not even then could I see fully. What height! I shrank from seeing his face, out of shyness. Also I was a bit scared by the fight that was developing between the brothers.

"Provoked, Arjuna shouted, 'Hey, you fellow. Don't talk of jealousy and such things. Come out of the hut. Pick up your bow and arm vs. I shall do the same. Let us see. If I finish you with one arrow, she will be mine. If you finish me, take her for yourself. If you are man enough, then accept this challenge.'

"Bhima replied, 'Arjuna, have you now become man enough to

challenge your elder brother? You never had the guts to defy me and challenge me. The battle you are suggesting is a duel. Nobody uses in a duel bows and arrows. It is always in the form of wrestling, body-to-body contest. Come out. With one clasp, I shall powder the bones in your chest. Like crushing to bits hollow wood, ready, to fuel the oven?' At this point, mother-in-law raised her hand and hit Bhima's arm and Arjuna's shoulder, one blow each. I had never seen a mother who had the power to thrash at that age such strong children. I speculated then: 'Suppose my mother were alive, would she have handled Drishtadyumma with such physical authority?' That was that. Her blows reduced the two to meek puppies. Utter silence reigned in the hut. She shouted at them, 'Bow and arrow contest, is it ? Wrestling, is it? My children, children I have borne, and brothers of one blood, falling foul of each other because of their infatuation for a girl! Shame on you. Shut up. Let me think and find a way out. Dharma, you never tell a lie. Tell me what really happened there?'

"By then I knew that these were the Pandavas. Dharma was the eldest. With a serene face. Lacked Bhima's body and Arjuna's sharpness. Tidy modest body. Even the eyebrows of Dharma moved slowly. He was then exactly as he is now. He did not open his mouth, as he stood with a bent head. His mother ordered, 'Dharma, spell it out. The truth.' It was then that I, shedding my shyness, looked up at his face. It was a face in a fix, in agony. He spoke as if he had a lump in his throat, 'Mother, to be frank, it would be against the moral law of Dharma if she married either of them, Bhima or Arjuna. Tell me, is it proper Aryan conduct to marry younger sons while the elder remains unwedded?'

"Sharp-witted Arjuna reacted immediately, saying, 'What then?'

"Dharma didn't speak again. But he did not stop stealing looks at me all the while! He couldn't take his eyes off me. Then I began to sweat. I cannot/now remember what had produced it — fear or sheer confusion/ "At this point of reminiscing, Krishne stopped fanning herself. She froze her twenty-six year old recollection at that point, into that particular frame. She could remember what others said, but she had no clear idea of what happened to her inside. But she recollected." The two feet on which my body stood, sweated and stuck to the floor." Her mind now resumed its act of journeying into the past...

"... Arjuna countered Dharma, "Elder brother, that means, you, too, are keen on marrying her. Until now I had believed that you were always just and impartial, never deviating from the righteous path, but now? You are teaching us now that the younger brother cannot marry earlier than the elder, advancing your right. Why didn't you advance it in the Hidimba forest? Why did you not advance your

claim then of being elder? Was it because you were scared stiff that the Raksasa woman would lift you by your hair and dash you against the ground?' At these words, Dharma bent his head even lower. His face was turning red like the eyes of a baby after it has wept. Mother spoke, fear mingling with wonder, 'What is that Dharma you are really saying?' She felt tired and sat down. She made me also sit down facing her. The door of the hut was open. The space in front of the potter's house was overflowing with people, people from our town. She told her sons, 'Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva, you go out and see that none of that crowd dares stand near our hut. Threaten to shoot arrows at them if they don't obey. Tell them it is a royal command.' Then they all made their exit. Their mother pulled me close to herself, and spoke, 'Child, you are not just a beautiful girl. Though you are not very fair in complexion, your features — your face, nose, eyes and build-have an irresistible attraction. Else how to account for my sons fighting like this over you? I shall return you to your father. What is the point of taking you in as a daughter-in-law, inviting internal conflict in to my household?' As a daughter-in-law I can tell you that these words made me very angry. I was told about my power of attraction by my friends and servants. Father and brother were proud of this. My companion-friend had said that every prince or ruler presentat the Svayamvara was gaping at me, totally entranced. But this Kunti was charging me with an offence. I raised my face to look at hers. It was a mixture of worry and helplessness. Yet she was all admiration for me. Her eyes were devouring me as if she was more infatuated with me than her sons! As if she was taking my hand in marriage, she stretched both her hands, held mine securely. And such big hands she had! What a tight, warm clasp hers was! I was sitting still, silent, with a bent head. We heard the brothers shooing away the crowds and ordering them about, 'You there, nobody should stand here. Go back to your homes immediately.' 'If you want to look at your princess, come to the marriage hall. Right now get back home.' 'Look there, your king's soldiers are moving here to chase you away.' Soon the five brothers trooped into the hut one after another. Then they all sat round me and their mother. They sat in a posture suggesting that they were not prepared to abandon their claims on me easily! Or perhaps they were planning to abduct me. Everyone of them carried a bow and arrows, excepting Bhima, who was bare-handed. His expression appeared to say, what have I to do with things like bows and arrows! Mother ordered, 'Sahadeva, go and close the door.' Only then did I identify Sahadeva as the one who had closed the door, but I had to look at him stealthily. He had a lovely, tender body. He was of my age or perhaps even younger. It was a blend of masculine muscularity and feminine softness. The face of a young boy on which moustache and beard had yet to appear. There was another fellow like him. The same age. Exactly the same build. It was already evening. But it was always night in that

windowless hut, with its only door shut. Besides me, they were mere shapes in that dark. They were distinguishable only in terms of their size. Their mother, who was holding my hand, said, 'Sahadeva, even Dharma has fallen for her beauty. It is, therefore, not possible to expect words of justice from him. You tell us what is the right thing to do, the just thing, in this situation. But I shall make the final decision. These three will be bound by it. If we decide that she will be harmful to our well-being, we shall return her to her father's care, and quit this town this very night.'

"Sahadeva didn't say anything. Everybody sat holding his breath, as if they were sitting under water. The only person breathing was their mother. Then of course, my blood galloping like mad, directionless. She asked her sons 'Why are you silent?' From the outside drifted the words of the soldiers - 'If you don't go away I shall arrest you right here.' Then mother said, 'Child, Sahadeva! you never tell a lie. Tell us what is right and just.' Poor Sahadeva! He coughed and then cleared his throat. In a voice that scarcely came out of his throat, he mumbled, 'Mother, please watch where Nakula is looking even in this dark.' Immediately Nakula added, 'Well, likewise, mother, where Sahadeva's heart is going, and understand the situation.'

"My galloping, directionless blood stopped at that moment. Their mother's breath vanished into the darkness. Now there was only darkness. Not even the indistinct shapes. Their mother withdrew her hand from mine. Then I felt absolutely alone. I sensed a silence beyond endurance. A loneliness with no companion to share it with! The loneliness of a kite, thread-less in the sky!

"After a brief interval, mother spoke, The potter's wife has given me some broken wheat. I have cooked it with milk and jaggery. Get up and let's eat together.'

"Sahadeva got up and lighted the oil-lamp. They all ate from the plate made of Teak leaves. After they finished eating, mother said, "Now I and the princess will eat and then sleep inside. All five of you stay outside, guarding us with bows and arrows, the whole night. Suppose Duryodhana's people came to abduct her from here. What is to be done? Until I come to a final decision regarding her, keep off the problem. No jealousy, no enmity, no hostility on her account. Bhima and Arjuna, you are particularly warned.'

"Who was bothered about the taste of the porridge? After closing the door, in the dim light of the lamp the mother of Pandavas sat by my side. Then grasping me by her two arms, she embraced me, and said, 'Daughter, haven't you heard about the children of King Pandu of Kuru country, adjacent to yours? Duryodhana tried to burn us all in the lacquer palace he had built for us. We have come out of it.

Look here, I have only sons. No daughter. Now you become my daughter.'

"What huge arms! Though emaciated, broad, full and warm chest. It was an embrace that dissolved my loneliness and produced a sense of hope. I remember that my own mother used to embrace me like that before she died. After her death, how could Krishne enjoy such warm, cosy embrace? That mother of the Pandavas won me over. Arjuna had bent the bow and shot the arrow at the mechanical fish. Bhima had defeated the persons attacking me with his physical prowess. The rest, too, had made their contribution to save me from the designs of Duryodhana and his friends to abduct me. But the one who really won me was that mother of Pandavas. She let me sleep by her side, and, gently passing her hands over my cheeks, she narrated the whole story of the Kurus. She described vividly the injustices heaped on the Pandavas. Of course, I knew all about it. My father kept me fully informed of the details about the Kurus. The details about the lineage of Bhishma who had given refuge to arrogant Drona and thus shared responsibility for my father's humiliation. Yet father was very fond of Arjuna. Perhaps the incessant praise he showered on Arjuna helped develop in me love for him!

"After it was just past midnight, she asked me, 'Child, do you know what it means to live a married life?'

"What did I then know? All I knew then was the little that I had been told secretively and in whispers by my friend and the married servant-maids. I used to embroider with imagination the little information I got with such absorbing interest. How could I tell her that I picked my knowledge in this fashion?

"She explained, 'In both giving and receiving marital happiness, a woman has five times the power and ability of a man. The clouds turn empty after they pour into rain. But is the earth content with a single cloud? On the surface of the earth, the rain may become a stream, river and flood, but beneath and within, the earth may not have become even wet! The earth will be waiting, with an open mouth, to cool another inner heat. Child, for you who are eighteen or nineteen, these words may not be difficult to understand. Marry all my five sons jointly. All the five are endowed with great generative power. Let there be abundance of happiness for you. The marital bliss you enjoy will be without a parallel in the entire Aiyavarta. Take this as my blessing.'

"Confused, trembling, I replied, 'What is it you are saying mother?' Even to this day I cannot understand or explain why I trembled then.

Mother, 'Are you scared? Don't worry. I'll see to it that all my sons obey you. And remember the arrangement I propose is not without

precedent or parallel. In the Himalayan region where we lived earlier they have this practice. The married girl is wife to all her husband's brothers. Even more important, there is a race called Devas in the upper Himalayan region, which is the origin of Aryan customs and traditions. They, too, have this practice.'

I supplemented, The non-Aryan groups in our Kingdom have this custom. The tribes which supply fuel wood, meat, blankets and things like them, follow this practice. I know quite a few servant-maids of mine who belong to such groups. But we are Aryans. And we, Panchalas, are among the best-known lineages in Aryavarta.'

She said, T think your father may agree to this arrangement. Of course, one who is a king must ask questions about right conduct and morality. I am sure Dharma will provide a suitable justification and convince your father. Anyway you have been won, and one has a right to dispose of and enjoy the object won in any way one desires. We have the right to share it. So why do you protest in vain and add to your unhappiness? When joy is flowing to you in a flood, it would be unwise to resist it and turn your back on it. I shall order all my five sons not to disobey any command of yours, not to cross any line you choose to impose on them as a restriction.'

"The following day, father invited all the five to his palace, honoured them with gifts of garments and ornaments, gave them seats worthy of princes, and then broached the issue of marriage. Dharma who spoke first, it seems, repeated what he had said earlier in the hut He said, 'Revered ruler of Panchala, we five shall jointly marry the girl we won yesterday. If you are agreeable to this, then please perform the marriage. If not, we shall make our own arrangements to the best of our ability. Remember, you had promised your daughter for the person who broke the bow with the fish-contraption. Now your daughter is our property, and nobody has a right to interfere in the matter.'

To this father is said to have replied, 'But then isn't what you are proposing a non-Aryan practice?' Dharma countered this, 'If it were immoral or against Dharma, then why do you permit non-Aryans to practice it in your own kingdom? Also, so far how many Aryan rulers who married non-Aryan women, have not crowned children born of such marriage? When this is the situation, what is wrong in our following this particular custom of theirs?'

"Dharma had governed Hastinavati as heir-apparent. How could one get the better of him in argumentation? Then Dharma replied, 'Oh, king, you are, after all, my senior. Worthy of our worship. We shall bring your daughter here. You may yourself give her away to ail five of us in a marriage rite. Can we dare live without your blessings? From now on, your blessings shall be our chief protection.' Then he

bowed to father. The others followed suit. Father was defeated. No,father won. He felt inwardly jubilant that a branch of the Kuru Lineage came under the protection of his blessings.

"Next day he took me and Kunti to the palace, and treated her with the honour due to a royal mother. Then he took me aside, and asked me, ‘Child, what is your own opinion in this matter?’

I said, Why do you want my opinion in this matter? If I refuse, would it be possible to avoid this situation? They have certainly won me according to your own terms. Having won, they have acquired the right to do as they please with me. This being the case, can you stick strongly to the stand that you will not give me away in violation of the Aryan Dharma?’

Father, ‘Look, the eldest, Dharma, has put me in a fix. He has asked me, if it is against Dharma, then why do I permit it for three-quarters of the population in my own kingdom? I said that it was their tribal custom. Then he asked me, if I allow people to do all sorts of things in the name of tribal custom, then will I not, as a ruler, be a sharer in their sins? He argued that the Raksasas in my own forests practise cannibalism as their tribal custom. But why have I not accepted it as legitimate?’ he asked. ‘Child, since yesterday, I am going mad worrying my head with the intricacies of Dharma. In the heart of my hearts, I feel that the right decision is to follow their mother’s suggestion. If even at this stage, you persist in rejecting their proposal, I shall order my army to throw them out of Panchala.’

"Father had shifted the whole responsibility to my shoulders, and this made me full of spirit. The enthusiasm to rule five husbands with such masculine virtues, an enthusiasm arising out of the expectation of enjoying what no Aryan woman had so far enjoyed. The happiness which was earlier indistinct now became clear in the form of joy flowing to me in five ways from five sources. Of course, there was also the satisfaction that this was, after all, a return to the original Aryan practice of their ancestors, the Deva people. So I told father, ‘Father, your wish is also mine. I feel that it is my Dharma to obey the will of the persons who have won me.'

"Since it was an unusual situation, father was naturally interested in clarifying the details of the married life with five husbands. I was standing behind the door to overhear what went on. Father emphasised that, though the custom was non-Aryan in origin, the details should conform to the Aryan norms. Our family priest joined him in these talks. They had worked out the terms of the marriage in black and white. First, Dharma as the eldest was to be the ruler and I should be given to him as the chief queen. Second, though the eldest ascended the throne through coronation, the other brothers had share in it as well as in enjoying me. Third, whatever the expansion

and growth of the kingdom, all the children born to me should be named as children of Dharma, Fourth, the children should call the other four also as fathers. All the children had equal right to participate in the death rites of all the fathers. Fifth, if any of the five brothers obtained a bride in any future Svayamvara, or if they won a maid in any war, such maids should be married in the same way, nominally to the eldest but shared by all. The routine details of the marital procedure of such subsequent wives shall be determined by the eldest wife, the chief queen. Sixth... Well, who wants to remember all those details? They talked of Aryan norms, Aryan customs, Aryan Dharma. All empty words. How easily Arjuna broke them when it suited him, and married a wife exclusively for himself. Here I am, alive. The chief queen! The symbol of his kingdom! The stake in his gambling! Victim of humiliations, doomed to live on the raw meat of hunted animals, roots and fruits of the forest, slaving in stranger's houses. Certainly, this is the bliss denied to other Aryan women! Five times the joy of any other Aryan woman! God knows why they perform such marriages based on competition between warriors! This Ksatriya system of svayamvara in which the most powerful person wins a bride, uses her as he wills, shares her as and with whom he wills, and even throws her away if he wills! I wonder who began this system!"

Jyotishmati approached Krishne. She said, "Mistress, the children are here. All the five have come in the same chariot. What a fierce sun outside."

A little later, commotion broke out in front of the house. The children got off from the chariot. Krishne rushed to the door. The sun was sizzling hot outside. It was a merciless scorching heat. Sweat had stuck to the faces and bodies of the children. And dust had formed into a layer on the sweat. They all trooped in, and straight away bathed. Meanwhile, the servants were bringing out dishes from the common kitchen fresh and hot and setting them in different houses. Krishne fed her children with the food Jyotishmati brought, and fed them against their resistance. Later she sat down, to finish her own food. No sooner did their bellies fill up than the children began to yawn. Outside, the fierce sun. In the centre of the room, covered with wet, cooling Lamaca mats on the walls, Jyotishmati unrolled mattresses for the children. The five children slept in a row. Five heads in one line. Only the legs were of varying lengths. Prativindhya was not particularly tall but Srutasena the youngest was the tallest. He was talkative. Krishne wondered whom the boy resembled. Well, she was not definite about it. Of course, none had Bhima's build. Indeed, no child looked like any one of the husbands. Their features were so mixed up, items drawn from different fathers combined somehow. One had Nakula's forehead, but a nose that belonged to Arjuna or Sahadeva or Dharma. Hence, nothing was decisive. All one

could be sure of was that they were all collectively a Pandava breed. So was Srutasena. Krishne ceased to worry about the matter. Prativindhya was unusually sparing of words. Mostly drawn into himself, absorbed in deep reflection. Even at that time he lay quiet, his eyes fixed on the ceiling. But the others were engaged in an animated discussion on the strategy of dealing with an enemy who surprised them from behind. They were debating about the best way to shoot arrows simultaneously in opposite directions. The first to sleep off was Srutasena, who ceased talking and slept. Srutakirti and Satanika yawned together and then slid to one side. The eldest had kept aloof from the discussion and the talk. No w he was not even sleeping. He was just lying down, face upwards, counting the beams above. His mother, Krishne, sat near his head, a fan in her hand. She began to fan widely to cover all the five. Then she asked Prativindhya, "Child, aren't you getting sleep?"

Prativindhya, "I am not sure that sleep will come."

Mother, "Don't you feel tired after the training in the sun?"

Son, "No, not really. I do not feel all that tired."

Well, he was a boy of few words. And it was very unlikely that he would speak his mind. Now five months had passed since his arrival here, but he was prepared to open out his mind to his mother to a limited extent. But once a way. That, too, when none else but the two were there. Also when his mother was silent and he felt drawn to her.

She asked, "Who taught you what to do when the enemy forces attacked you from behind?"

He, "Abhimanyu."

She, "Child, he has just completed sixteen. You will be completing twenty-four soon. Are you all so backward in archery as to learn from him? Didn't your uncle teach you anything?"

He, "Yes, he did. And very well, too. But Abhimanyu's father is training him now, and who is better versed in war strategy than Abhimanyu's father?"

Watching the beams above, he spoke those words easily as if they were ordinary, routine words. But they pierced painfully his mother, Krishne's heart. She said to herself, "Arjuna is teaching his son the art of warfare. Yes, he should do it. But aren't these five also his sons? Or does he reckon them as only sons of his elder brother, Dharma?" In a sudden flash, she saw Arjuna in a new light, in a new form. As a clever person, a pleasure-seeker, a warrior-hero, handsome, conceited, selfish. Already at the time of settling Abhimanyu's wedding, such ideas were dimly rising in her mind. Now they blossomed and she felt utter contempt for Arjuna, all on a sudden!

The feeling grew strong in her that Arjuna had fallen so low that she should even refuse to speak to him when he stood before her. Fanning the five children she sat motionless. Only Prativindhya's eyelids fluttered slightly as if he was looking at the beams. She was slowly coming to the conclusion that Arjuna, that vile creature, had no fear of Dharma, no code of conduct. I should carry the burden of Dharma on me, be crushed with it. He would let the fire of Dharma burn me. Others didn't worry about Dharma, especially Arjuna! She remembered, "After the consummation of the marriage with five husbands through five separate nights, their mother, on the sixth afternoon, had taken her and, holding her hands, had declared, 'Daughter, now you have given yourself equally to the five. I shall now teach you one supreme Dharma. You already know that the sole Dharma of an Aryan woman is to be totally committed to the well-being of her husband. Only if your husbands are united, they can re-conquer their kingdom. Only then can they defend themselves. If for whatever reason they developed breach in that unity, they shall all collapse jointly like a building that has developed fissures. They had never fought among themselves but now are prepared to do so for your sake. Now, thank God, they are again like united brothers. If there is an impression that you are partial in your attention to them, showing one more love than the others, it would start the process of disintegration and lead to eventual destruction of all. You must take it as a vow that you will love all the five equally, without discrimination, in deed, word and mind."

The mother-in-law preached the Dharma of a wife to her daughter-in-law to promote the welfare of her sons, their unity. Krishne went back to her past." How much I had to suffer to obey this Dharma'. Yes, in deed and in words, but in mind? Where did I possess the power to obey that Dharma in mind? Who has such power anyway? How could the mother-in-law realise the force of the Dharma of the mind itself, the mind of the individual person? Yes, I never spoke to anyone of them more loving words than I did to the others. I spoke in the same way, using the same tone of love, in speaking to each one of the five. I never favoured anyone of them more or less than I did the others. I gave myself to the eldest, Dharma, in the same way and with the same devotion as I did to the youngest, Sahadeva. But as for my mind, my inner love, unexpressed through words or deeds, this love, how could I have given it to anyone other than Arjuna? Of course, the mind spilled into words. Yes, Arjuna, with his expertise in not only love-making but also in love-talk, forced the inner truth of my mind into words. Thus, I began to discriminate in favour of Arjuna, not only in mind but also in word. When the mind and word join together, how can-the body not follow suit? The night that fell to Arjuna's lot was a night I experienced as something out of this world. Only his night. Yet this Krishne did not cheat the others. The extra

gratification Arjuna got was not because of my effort but because of his skill. I put in the same enthusiasm, the same skill and the same energy-while spending the other four nights with the other four brothers. It was not easy, but right from the sixth day after the marriage, this daughter of king Drupada was involved in this task and struggled to achieve equality of treatment between the five. Yes, she had to struggle hard to keep the five Pandavas united, and she held that unity in her first. Despite my efforts, if that unity broke, dividing their ways, what else can I do but simply feel sorrow at the futility of that effort?..."Krishne heard the clang of the smithy even in that heat, that wind less heat. Then she slipped back into the past." How old was she? Twenty-five. What was the children's order of arrival? They tumbled out of me, five babies, one after another. With a gap of two months of post natal rest. Then back to work, back to yielding the body each night by turn to the five husbands, hungry like tigers to eat me up. Conception after conception, leaving hardly any interval of menstruation stoppage. Children, post-natal period. And again marital life. Mother-in-law was all joy. Because one after another, only male children. At the same time, Khandavavana was turning into cultivable land. Khandavaprastha was turning out to be the most beautiful city in the whole of Aryavarta. It bore the new name of Indraprastha. By then I had been transformed from an eighteen-year old bubbling with life to an exhausted twenty-four-year-old, a worn-out cow. Five hefty males as husbands. Bulging like bulls. Gluttony of satisfying a four-night hunger in a single night. I was the one who bore their hunger and bore their children, completely run down. I realised that mother-in-law had not spoken the truth when she had claimed that a single woman was equal to five men in the matter of giving and taking love. A woman is not even equal to one man who has the advantage of being without menstruation, conception, delivery, post-natal period and breast-feeding the baby — and the talk of being equal to five men! I am sure mother-in- law spoke a lie to me. She did it to generate enthusiasm in an. innocent eighteen-year old girl. She was obsessed with just one thing — her sons' unity and welfare. Was her claim that a woman's ability is equal to the desire of five men, an illusion natural for a woman who had spent the best part of her life without real marital life? Well, having become an over-used cow, a sugar-cane totally squeezed out of its juice, that particular day I myself asked mother-in-law to say something about it. It was then that she altered the routine of my time with her sons, and forced it on her sons. Now there was no longer a daily change of husbands in bed. It was to be once a year by turn. It meant four years of waiting for me and four years' celibacy for each one of them. Then one year of marital life with me. Then perhaps the equation one woman to one man was restored. Yes, that saved my body from suicidal onslaught. My life was saved. It was strictly enjoined that none should approach me

when it was not his turn. I was to be blunt-spoken and impartial. [v] Then, too, the old woman exhorted me, Daughter, even under this new scheme, you must treat them absolutely equally, giving no opportunity for anyone to be angry or discontented. You must accept this position as a vow.'

"The new routine worked more easy on the body. But did this mean any relief from the violence on the mind? How could that mother- in-law of mine understand that Krishne is not only a body, but also a mind? How can all men behave exactly alike? The whole of the first year under the new arrangement was spent with Dharma, who, though he governed the kingdom with efficiency and impartiality, was never able to conquer my mind. There was no love-talk at all. No act or gesture to touch the heart, move it in depth. Only the stance of royal dignity and reserve. As agriculture and livestock of the kingdom prospered, and the new capital city got built, his sense of status and his reserve increased. He never indulged in pleasantries not only with his wife, but also with brothers, mother, and, in fact, everybody. The arrangement was that though I had to sleep exclusively with one brother for a whole year, I could speak with the others during this time. Also I had to live in the residence of the person whose lot it was to sleep with me. The situation was made tolerable because of children to divert the mind. But my mind and heart were all the time turned towards Arjuna. Irrespective of which brother I was with, I always imagined myself to be in Arjuna's arms, his words of endearment ringing in my ears. Now I began to feel frustrated with the new routine. Because it meant an absence of two years from Arjuna's love-making. To spend two long, endless years without the warmth of his flesh. Then an even longer absence of four years!

"One day Arjuna came to the palace where I resided. As usual Dharma was busy, as it was before noon, administering justice in the assembly hall. The servants got up and left the chamber, carrying with them the Children who were playing at the time. Arjuna sat facing me. I was sitting with a lowered head. Neither of us spoke. Was there really need for any words between us? We understood each other without the help of words. After a while, he broke the silence, by saying, 'Panchali'. I raised my head and looked at his face. My breathing was unsteady, and my forehead sweating. Moving closer, he took my face in his hands. He said, 'Didn't you hear me?' I bent my head again. Immediately he got up and shut the door. Then he lifted me and carried me to the bed nearby. I said, 'No', but did not forcefully oppose him. This time there was not the usual love-talk, no artistry, no poetry, no romance, no attempt to flatter me as a beauty, no tears of gratitude or fulfilment, none of the usual finesse—no, it was just impatient, crude animal gratification. He fled as soon it was over. Left me with the feeling that I was used like a prostitute, and

the guilt of having broken a self-imposed rule.

"After completing his work of administering justice from his throne Dharma came in the afternoon. The first thing he did was to ask me, 'Did Arjuna depart?' I was scared. I felt guilty. From the start I tended to regard him less as a husband than as a judge — it seemed so natural to feel that way. I simply muttered an yes. He made no further enquiries. Perhaps he was not aware of what had taken place in the room. Anyway who would inform him about it? None of my maid-servants would say a single word without my knowledge and consent. Their loyalty to me was absolute. Yet I decided never to become a prey to such harlotry. Krishne shouldn't be a breaker of vows. Should Arjuna try to repeat it, she would explain to him. Beg him not to do it. The following day, Arjuna was there again at the same time. The servants, as earlier, left with the kids. I told him in the politest language whatever I had wanted to say. Put the matter as gently as I could. Anyhow, how could I have used crude words towards him? He refused to listen to my entreaties. He thought I was rejecting him. He was furious. He slapped my cheek. He left in a huff. Three days later he came again. But I had steeled myself against his request. This time he didn't slap me. He merely abused me and left. He came again after an interval of one week. This time he taunted me, used barbed words against me. He shouted, 'Remember. It was I who bent the bow in the tournament and won you.'

"I answered him. I said, 'Look, Arjuna, this is no way to talk on a matter concerning brothers. Not the words to be used in this connection. You should not arrogate to yourself the privilege not shared by your other four brothers. When I, promising your mother that I would preserve the unity among you, five brothers, regard this as a vow, in my role as a wife, how can you develop the conceited and selfish idea that you alone won me,'an idea that is bound to destroy your fraternal unity?' I spoke to him very gently. Yes, I am sure about this. Even now I remember clearly that I used very gentle words, and entreated him, no, begged him. He waited for a while. Then he lowered his head. He left in silence even as I was requesting him to be seated. He left, never looking back.

"He left then never to come back. A day, four days, a week, a fortnight, a month, he was not to be found in the city itself. Not even in the kingdom. With him were about fifty archers close and dear to him and their fifty horses. Where did this fellow go? The eldest asked me, 'Panchali,he had been to see you. Did he, by any chance, inform you about his destination?' Even mother-in- law asked me whether I knew his whereabouts. I behaved as if I was totally ignorant. But who else but I knew the truth, knew what had really happened! 'Arjuna, I know that because of your anger for me, you have just disappeared. What purpose did you have in doing it but to hurt Panchali's heart?

Yes, you have achieved your goal. I have been hurt, have agonised. Please, return. Come back fast. We shall tell mother-in-law and get the routine altered. But how do you alter it? If we go back to the old pattern, it would kill me. While I cannot bear the physical strain of changing husbands every day, I shall not be able to have the patience needed by the system of annual change of husbands. Maybe we should compromise and have a change on a monthly basis. Yes, that would give me peace of mind. In any case, please, come back, fast. I shall myself broach the matter with mother-in-law. How much I was praying for it, within myself? Didn't your inner mind hear it? Has your inner heart turned deaf? For the first time, the very first, in my life, I writhed in agony,burning with desire. Well, you returned three years later, after wandering in foreign lands, marrying two' Naga princesses, leaving them behind with your sons, finally going off to Dwaraka, falling in love with Krishna's sister, and taking her as a wife exclusively for yourself, not to be shared with the others.

"Arjuna, you are clever, handsome, you can charm women with your beguiling words. Arjuna, you mesmerized me. Then you bamboozled three more and married them. And subsequently didn't you mesmerise women, without marrying them? Arjuna, you have an inflated ego. And you want to win women as trophies on the altar of your arrogance. Of course, this Panchali alone refused to be an ornament to your arrogance. Arjuna, you failed in the vow. You kicked Panchali with your left foot and kept away from her for just one reason, that she refused to accommodate your blind, animal urge for sex. But you, the bravest archer in the entire Aryavarta, who brought Subhadra, lost the courage to meet my eyes straight and direct.'.."Prativaindhya had turned to one side in sleep. He had closed his eyelids. But he was not asleep. Could one distinguish between mere closing of eyes and genuine sleep? She thought about him, within herself, "His intelligence is sharp. He reviews and examines everything mentally. He says that otherwise he will not get sleep. With whom shall I discuss these matters? Not with sons. And I have no daughters. I stopped with five, all sons. Soon after the new routine of yearly turn was installed and before a daughter could be born, I stopped conceiving. To whom shall I narrate the story of my struggles to preserve the unity of this Pandava brothers, the agonies I suffered! Subhadra is clever. She is not a motherless daughter like me. She did not have to face when she got married, Kunti in a mother's role, demanding the unity of her children. Her mind had no such trap to catch her. Nor is she a mad kind of girl who has the illusion that she can rule five husbands. Yes, she yielded to Arjuna's handsome form and wily words. Yet she always had her feet firm on the ground, calculating her self-interest in every step she took, in dealing with him. It seems she initiated the discussion, saying, 'Kuru warrior, I consider it a most meritorious act to hold your hand in marriage.

But, please note, I am holding only your hand.'

Arjuna, What does it mean?'

Subhadra, 'I am told that there is a custom among you, brothers, that any woman you marry will be only in the name of the eldest brother. And all the brothers share the girl equally in bed. But I cannot touch five men that way. For an Aryan wife, there is only one husband.' "

"He must have been joyous. Why wouldn't he be? He answered, 'Oh Yadava bride, I shall honour your wish and accept your condition.'

Subhadra, 'It is not important that you honour it or accept it. What should I do, if, despite your acceptance, after entering your house as a bride, your brothers insist on my following your custom? It seems, your eldest brother asked king Drupada to agree to this custom of your family.'

Arjuna, 'Tell me what I should do now.'

She, 'Your eldest brother should give assurance that as the eldest brother and as a ruler, he would accept the position that I shall be only Arjuna's wife, married only to him, and that this family custom shall not apply to our marriage. All the other brothers should openly and explicitly accept this condition. And your mother should also bind herself to this condition.'

'This fellow, silenced for once, sat still, head bent low. But she added one further condition, which was If I marry you, you shall be my husband, and nobody else's. As long as I live, you should not take any other woman as wife. You should not participate in any Svayamvara. From no king should you receive as tribute or gift, a woman.'

"And how thoroughly she covered the risks, and bound Arjuna in her knots! I am not sure whether she thought up all these stringent conditions all by herself or she was coached by her brother, Krishna, or her friends and mother suggested that it was wise to take these precautions when a man was going all out to beg for a girl's hand. In short, she is a clever girl. Cleverer than I. She is a clever one, that Subhadra of darling face, wanting only her own happiness. She was so clever that when her husband's elder brother lost his kingdom in gambling, became a pauper with his brothers, and had to go on exile into forest, she, Subhadra, did not hesitate to go to her natal home with her three-year old son. Not like me, hurting my feet with the thorns and stones of the forest, perpetually scared of wild beasts of the jungle, and night-long getting stung by ants, hornets and mosquitoes, going without food as a matter of course. Subhadra is a clever one. After the end of the thirteen-year exile, when they

returned, she managed to have her sixteen-year son wedded to the daughter of king Virata. And my twenty-four year old son, my eldest one, languishes still without marriage. It seems Arjuna himself asked Virata to give his daughter Uttara in marriage to his son, Abhimanyu, even before Subhadra arrived here to join him. Oh, you, Yadava bride, you won where I lost. Your victory in imprisoning your husband in your small fist, is great, memorable.

"Yes, I repeat, Subhadra won. Mother Kunti let me down. Arjuna sent through a messenger the message that if they did not agree to Subhadra being his exclusive wife, he would not return to Indraprastha, and that they would then be only four Pandava brothers, not five. Well, Kunti's heart, as soon as she heard the message, her mother's heart, turned towards the son. She feared that her son had died, even when after two years, Arjuna's companion horsemen returned, saying that from Manalur he must have gone to foreign lands. And the brothers were equally in sorrow. They were saying, 'Thank God, it is enough that he is returning.' And how could they have not agreed to his conditions? Was Subhadra a beauty like the daughter of king Drupada, a beauty that stirred the hearts of men in Aryavarta? None of them had seen her. And by then this Krishne had been a prey for eight years to the hunger of their youth. I was then no longer a young bride. They accepted Arjuna's terms. Kunti was impatient for her son's return home. After all, Subhadra hailed from her own region. Subhadra's arrival would strengthen their links with a branch from Kunti's own natal land. No wonder she was not prepared to let go this opportunity for reinforcing links with the land of her parents. How can Kunti who had risen to the status of the royal mother of Indraprastha understand the mind of the senior daughter-in-law who married those who, as beggars, had made their home behind a potter's house, who had taken the vow to preserve the unity of the Pandava brothers, and one whose father's powerful army had scared Dhritarashtra enough to call the Pandavas and offer them kingdom? Did she ask me, 'What reply shall I give to Arjuna's message? Did Dharmaraja ask me? Who asked me?' "Panchali's fanning hand became still. The five sleeping children were dripping sweat from their faces, necks and chests. Jyotishmati had soaked the Lamanca mats and they were wet with water. But outside, the sun was fierce. A furnace must be burning somewhere.

The noise of the hammer." Was this heat confined only to this place or had its fire spread to the Kuru land? This was the time for forest fires. The time for the fire swallowing haystacks and huts in the villages, the time of the consumption of whole towns in the fire. How good it would be to hear the good news that the sparks had engulfed Hastinavati in the fire, burning the whole city, the palace, the blind old fellow and his blind old wife and their entire progeny! Then perhaps this raging heat would subside. Then no need for Eamanca,

no need for fans. It would be so cool that there would be no room or reason for any sweat, not even a drop, in the whole universe, "Krishne felt. But the hand automatically began to fan." Marrying the five had made it easy and smooth for all. During the gambling episode, Duryodhana had invited, ‘Come, come here, woman, sit on my lap/ Then Bhishma scolded, ‘Duryodhana, if you address your brother’s wife like this, you are not an Aryan.’ I am not sure whether it was Bhishma or Vidura. Then immediately Duryodhana had retorted, ‘Am I not a brother of Dharma, Bhima, Arjuna and the others? I am now merely claiming the right of my brotherhood, realizing my brotherhood with them.’ And that Dusshasana had joined in, "We are fourteen brothers.’ ‘Was this daughter of king Drupada expected to sleep with the fourteen, spending a night with each by turn? They treated me like a prostitute, accompanying an army. But none ever used such words for Subhadra."

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Chapter

18

PRATIVINDHYA rolled on his back. He opened his eyes. Then closed them again. After a while he suddenly sat up, wiped the sweat on his face, neck and chest with the clothes he was wearing. His mother who was fanning, said, "Isn't it very sultry?" He turned towards her, took the fan from her hands, and fanned himself over his chest and stomach seven or eight times. Then he fanned his mother too." You have been fanning me so long. Come and sit here. I shall fan breeze for you and these four, now sleeping." She asked him to return the fan, saying, "Give it back to me. How can I allow a boy to fan me?"

He did not give it back. He continued to fan fast so that his mother also felt the breeze. She felt cool. It appeared as if the heat had subsided of its own accord.

She thought that while she could produce only air, her son produced cool breeze. She said to herself, "He is a boy, and his hand is fit to hold the bow and arrows. Fanning is meant for women." She thought her son had powerful and well developed arms, shoulders and sides, thanks to her brother's physical training. Then it flashed — she realised that the boy had the build of her brother, his maternal uncle. She passed her eyes over the other four lying down. She felt very close to them, when she found that all the five carried some feature or the other from her side, especially her brother's — maybe the face, the eyes or the nose! As she examined them more systematically, she felt that they resembled her father, their grandfather. She remembered her father's affection which he had showered wholly on her as a motherless child, and that took her back forty years.

Prativindhya, "Uncle has sent a message. The messenger, Chaitraka, came this morning, He is a great favourite in uncle's court."

Krishne, "Well, what's the matter? Your grandfather's health is all right, I hope."

Son, "Yes, his health is fine. It seems Duryodhana is sending out priests and Vedic scholars to mount a new propaganda campaign. Its

gist is: Panchalas are not true Aryans. Drupada has started to practise the non-Aryan custom prevalent in his kingdom, the custom of brothers sharing one wife, in his own household. The Pandavas were born and brought up in the mountainous region. The father-in-law and sons-in-law have now combined to impose this non-Aryan custom on the entire Aryan people, and they are now waging a war to promote this objective. They are asking the people, 'Where do you stand? Which practice would you follow? Are we Aryans or non-Aryans?' These are the questions asked by the priests and Vedic scholars."

What struck her was the fact that her normally reticent son, a boy of very few words, had spoken so many sentences together! She was not surprised that Duryodhana was indulging in such propaganda. In any case, it was a time of war. It was natural for parties involved to tell lies to further their aims. And Duryodhana was notorious for telling lies, and he could grow a whole harvest of lies without sowing a single seed! She felt that the only answer was counter propaganda from the Pandava side. But those words took her in another direction altogether. Her son added, "They conclude that the present war is a war of righteousness, Dharma. If you fail to go with us and support us in this war, Dharma will collapse. The priests threaten that those who do not support Duryodhana would find their parents rotting in hell."

"Child, let them threaten. I know the true Dharma involved in the matter. If Dharma is to triumph, then we will triumph. But what is the guarantee that Adharma will not triumph? Let that be. Tell me what you feel yourself."

"About what?"

She could not openly say what the issue definitely was. Something inside her held her back. Yet she had been thinking about broaching the matter with her son. Her worry was that the boy spoke so little. But now he was at least opening up a little. And the issue agitating her had quite naturally arisen.

Determined to have it out, she said, "Your grandfather got me married to five husbands."

The boy said nothing. He simply continued to fan his mother and the four brothers who were lying down. Just then Jyotishmati came there. She had brought water in an earthen pot to use it to soak the Lamanca mats. How fast mats absorbed the water! They absorbed one whole big pot of water. Even after her departure, the son sat fanning. Quiet. Krishne asked herself, 'Does it require such a long time to answer. Or had he feelings which he found hard to express?' She raised her head, staring at him straight and asked, "What do you

feel about it?"

He spoke at last, "When I was in Kampilya, this did not look to me to be unnatural, mother. Mother, do you know that many citizens of uncle's kingdom are like us. The non-Aryans regard us with great love. Now I think I understand a little: naturally people will like a ruler who approves of their customs, and even practises them. There, even our Aryan relatives never spoke a word of disapproval or contempt, not even indirectly. In any case it is a custom practised by the palace. But within four months of our arrival in this town, people appear to regard us as something odd, something apart from the rest. Folk here do not seem to feel we five are like other brothers and princes. One day the axle of a wheel of Srutasena's chariot broke. The carpenter who had come to set it right was probing him. Srutasena always talks a lot. The carpenter found it easy to talk to him. He asked him, 'Prince, do you all five address all five as fathers or call only Dharmaraja as father and others as uncles?' He answered that we called all the five as fathers. Then the carpenter probed, Do you naturally get the feeling that they should be called father or...' Immediately he noticed that I was close by and he bit his tongue, bent his head and started to shape the wood. In Kampilya, nobody bothered us with such questions."

She also felt the same way. But nobody had spoken to her like that. She thought, "As soon as our real identity as Pandavas was revealed, Virata's people began to look upon us with fear and respect. Our reputation was there. We had performed successfully the Rajasuya, our army chief had crushed the famous wrestler Keechaka as if he were a sweet-meat ball, and most recently we had beaten back the Kauravas who had come to steal our cattle. Sudheshne immediately joined her hands and bowing before me, begged me to forgive her. And how could lesser people like servants talk ill of us? Yes, what the child said was true. In our Panchala such a custom would not appear wholly amiss. But in the north and west of Panchala, most people are not even aware of this custom, and have never heard about it."

"Mother, I have been wanting to ask you a question for the last several days. But I never could ask it."

"What is the difficulty, child, in asking me?"

But he Swallowed his words. She went close to him, and placing her hand gently on his head, asked him, "You talk so little. Should you be reserved even with me? And whom do I have excepting you to talk to?"

He stopped fanning as her arm came in the way. As she lowered his head by passing her hand over it, his vision became restricted to the pillow on which he had rested his head, the mattress near the pillow,

Srutasena's head and mother's legs. He said, "You have suffered great hardships. You spent twelve years in a forest. Lots of sages and wise men mus t have been visiting the forests. Hence I am sure you must know the answer."

"Ask me whatever it is, child."

"What is the true Arya Dharma?"

As she stopped fanning for a minute or two, her body began to sweat. The four children became soaked in sweat on their foreheads and necks, and they began to roll on the bed as if unable to breathe. Especially Satanika and Srutasena pulled long faces as if they had bitten a bitter neem fruit! They opened and closed their eyes by turns. She took the fan from Prativindhya and then began to fan vigorously so that the breeze could cover all the children. Srutakirti stopped his gentle snoring and rolled to a side. Then he rolled back, his face upwards, and resumed his snoring. She asked herself, what is meant by Arya Dharma? She had till then never asked herself such a direct question. But her ears had turned deaf listening to endless and inconclusive discussion on Dharma. As for Dharmaraja, he was obsessed with it, his day starting with some reference or other to Dharma. The sages and wise men whom they met often in the forest were worried to no end about Dharma. Even Bhima and Arjuna were not averse to discussing it now and then. Didn't she herself ask this question to old Bhishma, Drona, Kripa and the blind fellow himself? What is it, this Arya Dharma? She saw Prativindhya watching her, expectant. Suddenly she remembered some of the words she used to employ in the forest to embarrass and pull Dharmaraja's leg. The memory of it made her laugh. Prativindhya who had no idea of why she was laughing, also joined in the laughter. Then Srutakirti and Satanika woke up. They opened their eyes and suddenly got up, their movement woke up Srutasoma and Srutasena.

Srutakirti asked, "Why are you laughing?"

"Your elder brother wanted to know what is the Dharma of the Aryans. It struck me that an Arya's Dharma consisted in hunting, drinking, whoring and gambling. This idea made me laugh!"

All the four who had just woken up joined in the laughter. Prativindhya half-opened his mouth but withheld the laughter. Mother spoke, "Those condemned to live in the forest shall have to hunt to get their food. Hunting is also justified when wild animals proliferate, living becomes tough, and land, live- stock and horses are lost. But this is not the Aryan way. No, before sunrise even, they gather their weapons — bows, arrows, spears and traps — to rush to the forest to hunt, not as a need, but as a past time. Even the uncivilised tribes do not stoop to this. As for drinking, I need not tell

you. The forest folk drink straight from the tree, piercing its trunk to let the juice flow, collect it in their bamboo or wood goblets and drink. I saw this when we were in the forest. If you drink it, it is not intoxicating. It puts more zest in you. Your health improves. But look at these Aryans — they do these things on the pretext of performing sacrificial rites, they do it on festive occasions, and no ceremony can take place without heavy drinking. They do not go to war even without drinking. And there is no god who is not addicted to it. And what ingenuity they have shown in extracting intoxicating beverage from rice, from jaggery and from the Soma creeper! They have experimented with ingredients to produce intoxication, and have introduced such drinks as an essential part of rituals to propitiate the gods.[1] And, as for their women — it isn't enough to give away a daughter in marriage. One has to send at least ten lovely girls to accompany her as companions. If the. king has a high status, then one hundred girls! Countless children are born in their bellies to increase the population of the servant castes..."

At this point, Prativindhya intervened, asking, "Those are the habits and practices confined only to Ksatriyas. Aren't they?"

"Well, they claim to be the guardians of the Arya Dharma, don't they? Which priest has the guts to tell them, they are doing wrong?"

He fell silent, as if he had accepted the truth of her words. The face grew grim and his sight turned inwards. Krishne continued, "1 need not tell you much about their gambling passion. Duryodhana rightly calculated that we who were at the height of prosperity, could be broken only through gambling. He felt that nothing else would work. After all, he knew that it was impossible to defeat us in war since we had proved our supremacy in battle by breaking the back-bone of Jarasandha who had put several kings in his prison to languish, and we triumphantly performed the Rajasuya rites after conquering the resisting rulers in all the four directions! His efforts to foment internal conflict among the brothers failed. There was just one way, gambling. Your eldest father, Dharma, renowned for expertise in law and morality, was also known for his weakness for dice. All the brothers were carrying out various administrative duties. He was enjoying the comforts of the throne, but he was interested in killing time. What better way of doing it than gambling? Some time was spent in high-flown discussions with scholars and experts. He played dice with courtiers whose main preoccupation was to flatter the king sky-high. He played with them and they naturally obliged him by losing. How could they, the eaters of his charity, dare defeat him? If they did so, wouldn't it provoke the master's wrath? So, he had the illusion that he was beyond defeat in dice, as he went on winning one game after another, with one opponent after another. Shrewd Duryodhana knew this weak spot in Dharma, and hit upon the

strategy of hurting Dharma where he was most vulnerable. He sent an invitation to Dharma for a game of dice. Why didn't he who mouths words of justice and morals day in and day out, refuse such an invitation? Were there only two reasons for accepting it — passion for gambling and pride? It seems it is against Arya Dharma to refuse an invitation to war or dice. There on the dice platform, as he began to lose game after game, with disastrous regularity, the Kaurava elders and some invited rulers, watching the game, entreated Duryodhana, 'Don't egg him on to play any more games. Do not challenge him to continue the play/ Then they abused him roundly. But why the devil did they not declare gambling a violation of Dharma, and order him to get up and abandon the game? He lost his kingdom, lost his brothers, lost himself, then staked me and lost. I who was then menstruating was forcibly taken to the open court, I who was wearing just a saree! And how they pushed me and mauled me, molested me, saying, 'You are now our servant. Come to us, come to sleep with us..' All the great worthies sat there silent as if they approved such conduct as sanctioned by Dharma. None spoke a single word against what was happening. None indicted Dharmaraja for gambling..."At that time, her eyes began to flow with tears, and her voice felt choked in the throat. Unable to control her feelings, she began to sob loudly, wiping her tears with her saree's edge. Naturally the children were in real grief. Tears began to drip from the eyes of the youngest, Srutasena. She continued, "Only one person really knew what Dharma was. More or less two months after we left for the forest, Krishna rushed from Dwaraka. As soon as he arrived, you should have seen the way he jolted Dharmaraja. The face of the eldest Pandava who regarded himself with conceit as the repository of Aryan wisdom and an ideal Aryan ruler, began to crumble with shame. Krishna gave it to him straight, 'How can a refusal to an invitation to gamble or go to war, be called violation of Dharma? Is it obligatory for a deer to accept the invitation of the far more powerful tiger for a battle? The deer, too, may defeat the tiger through strategy, skill and timing. You know that I held out against the more powerful Jarasandha as long as I could. But when he lost his patience and challenged me to fight, I used all my ingenuity to get out of the tight comer. It seems the Aryans of this region ridiculed me as a cowardly Yadava and a non-Arya. But didn't I bide my time and at the right time get Jarasandha vanquished by you? In any case, the issue of war is different. One may refuse an offer of war, but if the enemy falls on one, one must go to war. But if one refuses an invitation to gamble, where is the question of the other party falling on you? Should we surrender to the mercy of the blind rolling of the dice, our life and fortune? There is no habit more contemptible and more stupid than gambling. Dharmaraja, do you think that Dharma is simply mechanically repeating a routine knowledge of Dharma, a mere memorising of such a routine? I received pretty fast the news of

Duryodhana's invitation to you for a game of dice and your trip of Hastinavati to play the game. I realised immediately that this could lead to utter calamity. It did not take much intelligence to realise that Duryodhana, as a kin rival, would not tolerate your prosperity and would certainly work for your harm. It also should not have taken much time to see this. But unfortunately you seem to have lacked even that limited intelligence! I had planned to leave forthwith, but at that time Salva was trying to invade Dwaraka. He had with him a massive army. But by the time I managed to collect my people, defeat and slay Salva, and made sure that no further threat came from his side, it was too late, and you had lost everything in the game of dice. Subhadra came to Dwaraka with her child. I hurried here straight, without delay. Had I reached Hastinavati at the time of the game, I would have persuaded you and Duryodhana or at least tried hard to see that gambling is a violation of Dharma. If you had failed to heed my advice, I would have cut off your hands and his hands. You know that is the prescribed punishment for gamblers, yours first and then Duryodhana's'...."

Prativindhya, "What did the eldest father say?"

"What could he say? In that cold in which we did not have even blankets to cover ourselves, in that terrible cold, he suddenly sweated more profusely, than you are sweating now, and sat down shame-faced. His head lowered."

"Mother, why didn't you yourself say that gambling was against Dharma?"

"I didn't then have the courage to tell a man that he was not right. I pleaded with him not to go for gambling, tried to stop him, whimpered, and wept. Also how could I have understood the implications of Dharma until Krishna later made it so clear? If I had known it earlier, I would have prevented Dharmaraja from going, with the sheer force of my arguments. Of course, one cannot be sure whether he would have yielded or resisted mulishly. Only later I developed the ability to think on my own."

Srutasena intervened, "Then, when did you get that courage?"

Mother, "Did you say 'courage'?" She began to search her memory for an answer. As she was reviewing the time when, ever since her marriage, she had looked upon Dharmaraja and Kunti with religious awe. Jyotishmati came to her to ask, 'Shall I continue to soak the mats with water or would you move out into the open garden? The sun has gone down. The servants wetted the ground and watered the plants in the garden.' Srutasena got up, saying, "It is sultry in here. Let's go out." Krishne felt her body sticky with sweat. The other children were very anxious to know -their mother's answer. But she

herself was not quite sure or clean ‘ when precisely she developed the courage to be herself. She tried to direct her memory towards the event, but she failed to get the answer. She stood up. So did they all. The children felt like taking a bath. Saying that there was cold water ready in the earthen pots, she took them to the bath-room. She scrubbed their bodies hard with a sharp-edged piece of stone, their backs, arms and legs, till all traces of sweat disappeared. Then she poured more water, cooling their bodies. The garden was cool. The children entered it after their bath. By then their mother had lost her inclination to talk. Also she was not yet sure about when exactly she had first shown that courage. She lay down face upwards on the cool and thick mat spread on the grass, and watched the evening sky. The five children sat around her. They were fresh from their baths. Prativindhya had’ come out with a fan. Though the ground and the plants were cool, saturated with water, he went on fanning his mother as she lay. That induced her to close her eyes. And soon she went to sleep.

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Chapter

19

KRISHNE could not get sleep as she was lying with her eldest husband, Dharma, on the terrace of his residence. The entire terrace had been sprinkled with water to cool it, and they lay on a soft mattress. The sky, spanned by the eyes, spread above in all its blueness, the stars set in it shining in coldness. By her side was the husband, the eldest of the five husbands. It was difficult to make out whether he was asleep or not. He lay without any words. He was like that right from the beginning, right from the day she entered the Pandava household. Especially after losing the kingdom through gambling, he was too shame-faced to speak with a lifted face. Earlier she was awed by him, but now it appeared that he was afraid of her!"I had now resumed sleeping with him since the end of the incognito year. He will have me for a year now according to the agreement. Well, I am just lying down with him. He is not keen on physical intimacy. Nor am 1.1 shall let him sleep and just lie down. In the morning I shall shift to a separate residence to live with my children. I am still worried about things. What is Dharma really? When did I gain the courage to stand up to him? My memory was fumbling. Would Bhima be now travelling as it is cool or will he be camping? His is not a body that can be beaten down by long horse-riding in the sun, not a body which seasons' harshness can defeat — neither sun nor rain nor cold nor wind.

Equally undefeatable is his mind. He is the only one with a fully male body and male mind. Perhaps I should not have said openly that he is my only support! Where was the need? Why should the language of hearts which understand each other mutually and instinctively, be put into words? Sometimes I am agitated by such thought. But he is never the one to let things upset him like that. After he decided to kill Keechaka, the next morning this swaggering hero ate well and slept like a log in the afternoon! That is Bhima! How could he sleep? One can as well ask the question of the boulder..."Dharma at her side rolled to the other side. It was warm, and there was a fan near. She asked him, 'Shall I fan you?' He didn't say yes. But of her own accord, she started fanning him. Her eyes now turned to the past, a past that was a haunting present for her..."It was a fully packed court. There was Bhishma reputed to be the most

versed in the knowledge of Dharma in the whole of Aryavarta, Drona of my father's age, Kripa and some other rulers. They all sat with bent heads, either because they did not know what was Dharma or because they lacked the courage to speak out their minds. This fellow left without delay when the call to play dice came. He asked me to go with him. Then the brothers followed. Did they go to proclaim that they were heroes who had just accomplished a great Ksatriya rite of rulership? I went, bedecked with choice jewels from the gifts and tributes laid at their feet by foreign rulers during the Rajasuya rite. Well, I was anxious to show off before cousins' wives! The wealth and prosperity of Hastinavati at that time were proverbial. Did not the wives of Duryodhana and Dussasana come loaded with ornaments to the Rajasuya, with the idea of showing off before lesser rulers' wives? But when I arrived, the wives welcomed me with ceremony and pomp. The people of Hastinavati flocked to have a glimpse of me. Was it because I was the wife of those who had successfully performed the Rajasuya or was it because I was a female freak who had five husbands? Old woman Gandhari treated me so affectionately, and talked to me so warmly. Some ten or eleven years ago, she had shunted me off to Khandavaprastha with the words, 'Girl, you are said to be very beautiful. My sons have evil eyes. Please rush off to Khandavaprastha with your husbands.' Now there was no such talk. Did they know in advance that in the next four or five days, this Panchali's jewellery and dress would go to them through gambling? I am not sure whether the old woman knew this, but would the daughters-in-law lack a knowledge of it? Knowingly did they put on a show of welcoming me? Or perhaps how could they know what men planned and did in the outside world? No, they didn't know. I am certain. The men, of course, were rival kins. I have a feeling that they, as outsiders who had now become a part of the household, were not anxious to get embroiled in a family feud. It is one thing to feel part of the splendour and wealth of Hastinavati, something natural to women. But it is quite another thing to join their men in their wile and guile. I recall how they all stood trembling with fear when Dussasana seized me, clad in a single wet garment and a woman who was undergoing menstruation, and dragged me relentlessly to the platform where the dice-players sat. After all, which Aryan woman has the guts to stop an immoral husband from doing a wrong? It seems they all ran helter-skelter towards their mother-in-law, Gandhari. I believe they told her, 'Your son Dussasana is doing the unspeakable to Panchali. This would be the end of everything. Please go and prevent it before it is too late.'

"At Dussasana's words I was scared to death, and rushed towards the Kaurava wives. But he followed me, seized my knotted hair- top, pulled off the hem of my saree, saying, 'Oh, are you draped in a single piece? No blouse. A menstruating woman. No matter even if you are

completely naked. After all, you are now a servant-woman.' He didn't let me speak but held me tight, clasping my shoulders and took me to a hall packed with strange men. It seems he had seen me during my Svayamvara. May be the desire to touch my body first grew in him then. Maybe he satisfied it now! Everyone there was sitting silent with a bent head. Bhishma, Drona and the five Pandavas. Only three persons raised their heads to enjoy the fun — Duryodhana, Karna and Sakuni. And Karna, in particular, encouraged Dussasana, shouting, 'Bravo, bravo Dussasana', and laughed raucously. Sakuni also joined the laughter. Yes, now I remember. Yes, it was then, at that moment, that I became steel, my courage against men was born. As long as a woman has faith in the decency of men, she will not gain strength and courage against them. They seem unnecessary. The entire throng of males there lacked decency. Lacked awareness of even elementary Dharma. No not even Bhishma, Drona and Vidura, not a single one of them. When I went straight to Bhishma and asked him, 'Is it Dharma on the part of Dharmaraja to employ me as a stake in gambling?' What did that grand-father of the Kurus, the most ancient of the entire people, reputed as the greatest expert in Dharma, that white-bearded chronic bachelor, that old fellow say? This: 'A man who is himself somebody's property has no right to stake anything in a gamble. But a wife is perpetually under her husband's control and authority. Thus Dharma is very delicate and ticklish. I, therefore, refrain from saying anything in this matter. This wretched sinner Sakuni misusing the Dharma of the game, managed to get Dharmaraja intoxicated with the love of gambling...' Thus he was just content with abusing Sakuni without restraint. And that was all that old fellow's expertise in Dharma amounted to!

Real Dharma sprouted in Bhima's heart and mind. Till then I had no idea of what Bhima really was. I had merely noted the most easily visible qualities inhim—his bravery, his enormous physical prowess, his short-tempered nature, and spontaneous attachment to children. But in that hall crowded with strangers and kin, he sat hissing with wrath. As soon as the old fellow Bhishma had evaded the situation by simply calling Dharma delicate and ambiguous, Bhima, unable to contain himself, thundered, 'You, Dharma, do you know something? In a gambling house the only women to be friends are prostitutes. It is in a prostitute's household that gambling mostly takes place. The person addicted to gambling will gamble till even his clothes are lost in the game. But even he will never stake his prostitute in gambling. Should he do so, she will not hesitate to pick up her shoes and show him his place. When such is the case, you staked your chief queen and your wedded wife. Do you know what are the chariots, horses and jewels you lost here? They were all what I had won from the eastern countries during the Rajasuya. Indraprastha was built with the collective sweat of all of us. But respecting the obligation to obey

an elder brother's authority, taking this as Dharma, I shall say nothing further about them. Of course, when you ranked your wife below a prostitute, played her as a stake, there is no wonder that these. ' brutes called her a servant-maid. I say that the first punishment should be awarded to you. Sahadeva, get up and fetch a fire. First let me burn to ashes both his hands, the palms and fingers. Then we will attend to other matters.'

"Can one discover Dharma by weighing things precisely with minute weights as lightseeds? Dharma must be seized with violence on the spot. It must be caught in a tight embrace. How can clever Arjuna know Dharma? He intervened immediately, 'Bhima, do not abuse and humiliate the elder brother. It is cowardice not to accept invitations to war and gambling. A refusal would be unworthy of a Ksatriya. Elder brother is guilty of no wrong/ He stayed Bhima's hands. But why did Bhima accept all this? Why did he stop at this point? Were his words mere expression of momentary anger? Or was his understanding of Dharma not very clear? What was there to be clear about? Of what use is the intelligence of a person who, would weigh the niceties of Dharma when someone molests his wife by touching her body rather than rush at the aggressor and finish him off or be finished off by him? Better kill or be killed than turn tail like a coward. Arjuna succeeded in enveloping Bhima's mind in a fog of Dharma. Arjuna justified his elder brother's crimes in the fashion of a loyal dog. It was Karna who said, 'Those who have lost themselves and lost their kingdom and become servants, have no right to wear the garments and ornaments meant for kings. If those below them wear the accoutrements of those above, wouldn't this insult the kings gathered here? Order them to divest themselves of their crown, symbol of royal status, their epaulettes, their arm-bands and necklace of gold. Let them don ordinary dress.'

'No sooner were these words uttered than Dharmarja took off his crown and laid it near the dice! It was now easy for him to remove next the necklace as there was no crown to obstruct it! After taking off the ornaments, Dharma looked very ordinary. He became a real servant now. He sat as before, his head bent in shame. Arjuna followed his elder brother. His bravery consisted in being a faithful dog to his brother. Nakula and Sahadeva also removed their royal dress and ornaments. But when Bhima started to take off his crown, it touched me like a flame. Bhima lacks real intelligence. He could dig deep into the meaning of Dharma, but did not have intelligence to grasp it. Alas, Karna did not wait till they finished divesting themselves of the royal garb and symbols. Or did he want to satisfy a secret wish to look at my knees and thighs in the nude? Dussasana was not the one to miss the chance. He came close to me and got hold of my saree's edge. He started to pull it off. What intention could he have had excepting to disrobe me? A menstruating woman. Without

any under- garments. They had not accepted the legitimacy of a single wife for five brothers. In their hearts the Kauravas felt that a woman shared by five men should be regarded as a prostitute, a kept woman, and hence anyone can have a go at her. What if the hall was thronged, courage had sprouted in her of its own accord. Yes, I am a daughter of king Drupada. I used to worship fire every day without fail. I am a king's daughter who continues to do so. When the time comes, can a member of the lineage of Fire lose courage?

> Agnim manye pitaramagnimapim |
> Agnim bhrataram sadamit sakhdyam ||
>
> Fire is father, fire is mother;
> fire is brother and fire is friend.'

Well, I had almost forgotten. I had been fanning non-stop with my left hand. My hand was aching. At my side this fellow, Dharma, sleeps blissfully. He is asleep. How could he not have sleep? He who allowed his rival kin in a full hall to touch his wife and disrobe her, as he sat with a bent head. Could he do anything but sleep?..."Then she placed the fan on the floor. Her left hand was aching. She tried to assuage the pain with the right hand, by pressing it hard. Above, the moonlight was mild but it enabled her to see clearly back into the past. She remembered distinctly. It flashed, memory of the past. She had retorted Dussasana, 'You, cur, I am not just a wife of this brainless brute. I am also a daughter of king Drupada. Daughter of Drupada, the worshipper of fire. A sister of Drishtadyumna. Beware, my father and brother will arrive with the army to raze the palace of those who caused their daughter's servitude, and then plant on its ruins a forest.'

Duryodhana had replied, 'Don't you know that we had bound your father to the cot of our teacher? Don't prattle too much. I shall not call you a servant. I will call you my queen. Come here and sit on my lap.'

She had retorted, 'The one who bound him was not you, you rat. It was accomplished by Arjuna, your present enemy. At that time, my brother was still a boy. Now my brother is a chief of the army, an heir-apparent. Get that into your head.'

Yes, Dussasana had replied, 'Brother, these Panchalas have been hurling threats at us for so long. They stopped doing so only after we became powerful ourselves. Now she is trying again to start threatening with action by her father's family. Why be afraid of her?' Karna expressed his desire, the street-dog urging the house-dog, 'Don't be scared. Pull the saree off her body. I am there to take care of the consequences.'"

It took her a while to remember the next words. She had replied, "'Don't imagine that I have the support of only my father and brother. You curs, do you remember who was given the most honoured place in our Rajasüya, he who sliced the throat of Sisupala for dissenting? The news will soon reach him, too. He, too, will hurry here to take care of you. I have now realised that these five husbands are eunuchs. But let me remind you that my father and brother are not eunuchs. Krishna of the Yadava clan is also my elder brother. He is male enough to be a husband to all of you put together. He shall be here with the entire army of Dwaraka. From the south will march the Panchala army. Beware, they will uproot this Hastinavati, dig into it, let the Ganga flow into it, and then grow an orchard over it!'

"It was then that everybody really got scared. It was then that Duryodhana's face became distraught. It was then that Bhima rose suddenly and roared, 'You there, Dussasana, you have touched my wife's body. Let none call me Bhima if I fail to fell you on the ground, break your chest, and drink your blood. Let not my fathers and grandfathers go to Heaven, if I do not do this.' Bhima's mind may become occasionally clouded, but his courage and spirit never suffer an eclipse. The entire hall trembled. What a voice it was! It went beyond that hall, and pierced the ears of the women inside, and Dussasana's own mother rushed in fear to the hall. Though not really blind, she had blind-folded herself because her husband was blind, and she reached there with the help of a servant. She went inside with her blind husband, holding his hand. The sleeping heads of the old men who had been mentally benumbed, now were jolted to wakefulness. It was then that Vidura started preaching morals to Duryodhana. And what morals! Gambling was natural for a Ksatriya; but extreme gambling was immoral. He added that obsession with it was against Dharma." Well, what kind of moral was it? Neither here nor there. Lacked Krishna's decisiveness and definitiveness. She said to herself, "This Vidura was supposed to be a great expert in Dharma. Wasn't it through him that the invitation to gambling had been transmitted to Indraprastha? Didn't this great expert in Dharma know the true intentions of Duryodhana and his breed? A good old man but goody, goody, with total lack of clarity in thinking...

"Yes, Duryodhana was scared, it is true. But because of it, would he consider it dignified to re-trace his steps? How cleverly he addressed me then, 'Beautiful one, it was never our intention to humiliate you. But tell us, should not a servant look and behave like one? Would you tolerate it in your own palace if your servant draped herself to cover her legs fully, as you are entitled to, as a mistress? Dharmaraja staked his brothers and lost. You tell me yourself whether he has the right to stake you or not. If you say, yes, then you are our servant. Say, no, and you are free to walk away from here. It is as simple and clear as that. There is no second word. You will be free to go where you will

and live where and ho w you will. Now I have put your fate entirely in your hands. You decide now.'

"What was the true implication of his words? If I agree that Dharma has the right to stake brothers but not me, this means I am an outsider, doesn't it? What then would be the relationship between me and Dharma? He was clever in talk, that Duryodhana, devilishly clever. And in that surcharged situation, who would have the sharpness and patience to unravel the intricacies of Dharma and unriddle its secret?

"Of course, it didn't take me long to see through his ruse, the idea behind his words. Well, once I say that Dharma has no right to stake me, then I would be admitting that he was not my husband. Once I admitted it, it would mean that there was no relationship between Pandavas and the Panchalas. That, naturally, meant that the Pandavas did not have the support of Panchalas. At the same time, it meant the reverse, that Panchalas did not have Pandava support. They could then invade Panchalas easily and finish them off! Into what a hopeless maze did they push me! Meanwhile, Dussasana had let go of my saree, waiting for me to decide. He had let me stand there free, as confident of my victim status as a hunter of that of a deer fallen into a trap.

"In the pose of being committed to Dharma, he turned to the five there, and lashed at them with words, 'Bhima, would it be possible to unravel the intricacies of Dharma, if you stupidly scream that you possess a huge hulk of a body swollen by gluttony? I am repeating what I asked Draupadi. Give me your answer. Does or does not your elder brother possess the right to stake you? If you answer yes, you are a servant. And as you should know, a servant cannot shout like you do in the presence of the master. But if you say, no, you are free this very moment. You have the freedom then to go where you will. You know there is that Indraprastha, you have named it out of conceit, well, you can go there. But Khandavaprastha is mine. This is because the question of its having become a lost stake raises no issues of Dharma.'

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Chapter

20

"Bhima found himself tied up in unresolvable knots. Bhima who was standing stiff like a warrior, bent his head low. Then Duryodhana spoke to the next brother, Arjuna. He said, 'Arjuna, I shall ask you the same question. You, too, have the option to reject your elder brother's right to stake you and then go free where you wish. The same opportunity is there for your younger brothers, Nakula and Sahadeva. Since Dharma has staked himself, he has lost this option and opportunity. He is deemed to be our servant. I can assure you that, in my kingdom, servants are well looked after, never wanting in basic provisions — food and clothing. We have never been devoid of compassion in dealing with them. We have never forced an incapable servant to work. We have never come in the way of their eating, sleeping and sex. Let me point out to you that many servants in this Kuru kingdom, have opted to stay here even when given the choice to leave. In fact, servitude in my kingdom is merely a technical thing, a formal symbol. There is no restraint on your enjoyment.'

"I didn't expect Arjuna to have the face to answer. The less said about Nakula and Sahadeva, the better. Then Duryodhana turned to Dharma, and said, 'Dharma, you have lost. It is but natural that old people in the court are moved to compassion by the sight of a person once a king becoming a servant, divesting himself of the symbols and garments of his former royal status and then sit with a bent head. But never make the mistake of confusing compassion with Dharma. It does not follow that Dharma is on your side. What we did was plain gambling. If, by chance, I had lost, then Dharma would have been in your favour simply because the compassion of these old heads is biassed in your favour. You are said to be an ideal follower of Dharma; and it seems you have been always like that. Moreover you have succeeded in raising your fame to the heavens by performing the Rajasuya. But haven't you learnt the.Vedic stricture that other gamblers pull the dress and hair of a gambler's wife because the gambler plays with a greedy eye on other people's money?

> Anye jayam parimrsantyasya |
> Yasydgrdhadvedane Vajyaksah | |

Didn't we both study the Vedas together? Did you sit down to the game of dice in Hastinavati without any intention of winning money? It is a hoary custom for gamblers to pull the dress and hair of the wife of a gambler who is unable to pay up his losses in the game. Let not you or your well-wishers here get away with the idea that my brother Dussasana has committed a great sin here.'

Dharma did not stir his neck even fractionally. Duryodhana carried on relentlessly, 'Bhima, Arjuna, children of Madri, when a person loses all in gambling, his parents and brothers say — we know not this man. You are free to tie him up and take him where you wish. This, too, is a Vedic stricture.

> Pitamatabhratara enamahuh |
> njaanimo nayata baddhametam ||

Therefore, think well over the opportunity I have offered you now, and brand this fellow who has not hesitated to stake his own brothers and turned them into servants, as a stranger, a nobody to you. Then, according to the Dharma, you can go scot-free. Anyhow, you are brave warriors. It shouldn't be difficult for you to win a new kingdom.'

"What could the brothers have said? What would Bhima have said? And how would Arjuna's mind work? Was it not possible for the four brothers to become free, and then win back Indraprastha with the help of the Panchala army? Perhaps they were unable to see the trick Duryodhana might have hidden in the granting of freedom to them. At that point, the blind king holding a servant-maid's hand for support, came to the hall with quick steps. He came straight to me. Behind him was Gandhari. She was an exemplary wife who had denied herself eye-sight because her husband lacked it. She had both her eyes covered with a band to turn herself blind. My legs were paining because of continuous standing for such a long time. The three-day period of menstruation had already given me body-ache. If I stood a little longer, I might well have menstruated blood right therein the open hall. Would it have been any less humiliation than what I had already suffered? Yet, there was such a thing as the honour of a woman.

"Fumbling for my hand, the old fellow said, with an affection never before shown to me, 'Daughter, you are a great woman. If tears flow from your eyes, it will do no good to our lineage. Ask me what gift you want, what do you wish? I have the power to grant your every wish. Though my son Duryodhana may be ruling, the ultimate sovereignty lies with me!'

"Wonder of wonders! Who was responsible for this dramatic change in situation? But did I have any time to think about such

things?

I answered, ‘Arya, what is there in the world more dear to a mother than her children? They have not yet been staked and lost in the game. Isn’t this true?’

Not only Dhritarashtra but the whole court as one man said, ‘Yes, yes.’

I said, ‘Let not these innocent children acquire the stigma of being called children of servants. Please liberate their five fathers with their bows and arrows. As for me, I refuse to accept that I am a servant. I am not saying this, following the line of perverted justice which Duryodhana and Karna have taken here. I am a free person independent of their way of thinking.’

He said, ‘All right. Ask for the return of the kingdom and wealth your husband has lost.’

I replied, ‘No, that I will not.’

Baffled, he asked, ‘Why not?’

I said, ‘Great king, I am the daughter of a king. Simply because I have been given away in marriage, it does not mean that my father has abandoned all responsibility for me. And my husbands have become free, with their weapons. It is not proper for a Ksatriya to beg.’

He continued, ‘Listen to me, daughter-in-law of mine. I shall not under any circumstance allow the waging of a war between my sons and Pandavas over the kingdom. I have already returned to Dharmaraja all that he had lost in gambling. You six start off for Indraprastha forthwith. Don’t delay even for a moment. Panchala Princess, Today you have been the most humiliated. In exchange for what I have granted you, I ask you only one thing, please forget today’s happenings and regain your equanimity.’ Then Duryodhana intervened, saying, ‘Father.’ The Old man was tough with him, and said, ‘No father or mother now. Shut up your mouth and stay quiet.’ Yet I heard Duryodhana and Karna having the last word, when the court dispersed, saying, ‘They were saved by a woman.’

Krishna’s saying that if one wins in gambling he loses his equanimity and if one loses his sanity, was very true. Either way, one ends up with a loss! When we were returning in the chariot, back to Indraprastha, Dharma was sitting with a bowed head. When we were half-way through we camped. Dharma, suddenly galvanised himself, woke from sleep, to say, I shall return immediately, and challenge him to play again, and then defeat him. I shall make him stake Hastinavati, and then win it.’ Arjuna who was resting in the next tent caught the madness from Dharma. Dharma continued, ‘We who have

successfully conducted Rajasuya, should we suffer the humiliation of a defeat in the game of dice? If we do not go back and avenge our defeat, then what will happen to our honour and prestige, the honour of Pandu's illustrious sons? Now I realise it. He had played some trick to cheat us, perhaps in the very make-up of the dice used. I shall tell him, 'These dice are not all right. I have brought my own dice, and I challenge you to play with these.' Even Arjuna fell for his stupid bravado! Where was Bhima then sleeping? Just then the messenger sent by Dhritarashtra inviting him to another game of dice, arrived, and immediately Dharma hurried away to play again! Arjuna followed him. In the chariot behind were I and Bhima. Why did even Bhima fall for that madness? He was pretty confused about the question whether it was Dharma or not to refuse an invitation to play. But then Bhima did not have the right understanding that an Arya is not obliged as a matter of duty to show his prowess in heroism as well as in gambling. I, too, did not know it until Krishna had patiently and persuasively enlightened her. What lay at the heart of his infatuation with gambling? Was it the stupidity to prove that he, too, is well versed in the game? Or was he keen on wiping out the odium attached to the fact that he had earned his freedom through a woman and would want to gain it by his own skill in the game? Till now, he hasn't made this clear to anyone. During the twelve years of exile in the forest, how persistently Bhima tried to ferret out the secret? Even when Krishna asked about it directly, there was no answer. Only silence. A monotonous silence. The sort of silence now he showed as he slept to one side. Or did he find it bitter to swallow that it was a woman's mediation that came to his rescue when they stood before the mounting humiliation inflicted on him, his brothers and wife in an open assembly "? Wondering what sort of expert in Dharma he was, she closed her eyes. Yawned. Then once again she was back to reflection: "I must sleep now. For how many days these thoughts have continued to flow in my mind? They have become my constant companions. They rise inside me to no purpose; they are useless ..."She yawned again shut her eyes tightly, and fell into thinking, "When Krishna came to visit us after we went into the forest, he told us the Vedic injunction — 'Never gamble with dice. Cultivate land. Consider the wealth earned through cultivation as great and be happy. From it come your cattle, your wife. I have been taught this by the Lord of the Universe, Savitru.'

> Aksairmadtuyah krsimit krsasva
> vitte ramasva bahumanyamanah |
> tatra gavah kitava tatra ja ya
> tanme vicaste savitayamaryah| |

"If Krishna had been present in the hall, he would have given a fitting reply to Duryodhana. This Dharmaraja who started his day

with discussion with Vedic experts, didn't he know this Vedic dictum? Krishna is right. He doesn't prattle about Dharma in season and out of season. Yet none of these knew as much about the Vedas as Krishna. None of them can interpret it as he can. They lack his intelligence. I must visit him in the morning. Again I am haunted by the memory of the gambling platform. Comparison between Bhima and Arjuna. Arjuna had declared, T shall kill Karna and his followers who have humiliated us so much in the open court. If I do not kill them, then let the static Himalaya mountains become mobile. Let the moon lose his quality of coldness. Let the brightness of the sun disappear. If Duryodhana does not return us our kingdom in the fourteenth year, I swear I shall keep up this vow.'

Bhima said, 'Arjuna, do not make a vow like a dog that Kas been thrashed. Do it like a lion, that whether he returned the kingdom, or not you shall kill them. I swear that I shall smash Duryodhana's thigh, tear apart Dussasana's intestines and drink his blood. Let your vow be equally heroic.'

Arjuna, 'But Bhima, suppose they do not violate the conditions of the game...'

Bhima, 'I refuse to enter into an argument with a person who has the mentality of a dog, the mentality of a bitch. My vow is my vow.'

Sahadeva said, 'You, Sakuni, if you, who is the cause of the humiliation heaped on our wife Draupadi, face me in the battle, I swear I shall kill you.' Nakula said, 'If Dharmaraja permits me, to please Draupadi I shall participate in the slaying of the sons of Dhritarashtra'."

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Chapter

21

"ARJUNA, you are certainly a skillfull archer, a skillful user of words. But a coward. I was in love with you because of your artistry as an archer about which father used to speak so eloquently. Then your verbal wizardry mesmerised me. A woman does not know whom to love until she has attained mental maturity. She will not weigh critically the person whom she loves until she finds herself plunged into sorrow and attains a sense of compassion. Bhima, I failed to recognise your true self in the beginning. I was just a dutiful wife to you. I never burst into the deep love of a lover and flowed towards you. Then I failed to read you, sidetracked by your unpolished, naive nature, and your incapacity as a conversationalist. But how can I ever forget the days when my mind, heart and love burst out, flowing towards you? When my feet fissured after walking from Hastinavati for three days and three nights, in bitter cold, you had no time and awareness of the need to attend to me? You never had any idea of the sophisticated needs of a woman. You were immersed in your anger. Wasn't it when Dharma and Arjuna were discussing the idea of erecting a hut somewhere in the forest that the Raksasa, Kirmira, attacked us? The fury and force of his thundering voice made my head whirl and I fell down unconscious. When I opened my eyes, Sahadeva was fanning me. Dharma asked him, 'Who are you?'

Kirmira, 'Who are you all?'

Dharma, 'We are Pandavas. I am Dharmaraja. The brother next to me just went out in search of water. Next to him is Arjuna here. These two are the youngest of the lot. After losing in the game of dice with Duryodhana, we are here to spend a twelve-year exile in the forest.'

Kirmira, 'How dare you enter my forest? What did you say was your name, your brother's name?

Dharma, 'I am Dharma, my brother, Bhima, his brother...'

Kirmira, 'Enough. Stop. Is he the same Bhima who has killed my elder brother, Bakasura? If I kill all the five of you, it would be our

feast. Peace to my elder brother's spirit.' Immediately he picked up a round piece of rock lying near by, and the speed of his action made Dharma dumb. But Arjuna took up his bow and arrow. But what can arrow do to an onrushing wild elephant? Just then there was the noise of a huge branch being wrenched from a tree, Bhima, that was you in action, ail power-packed, you rushed out with the pace of a tempest and knocked him down with the branch before he could hurl the stone. Only lions and tigers have the pace, the violence, and the fury that defy all danger to life, such as you have. How can the war strategists and skilled archers possess such qualities? But how quickly he clasped you like a tiger! Without noise you clasped the arm-pit of your adversary and bent his arms. The piercing cry of pain from him. Then, he extricated himself and began to act in fury. But as he rushed at you again, you were ready with your trick. You pressed your knees against his waist, but he was biting your forearm with his teeth. Flesh came out and blood, oozed. But you, unmindful of the hellish pain, squeezed his throat so hard with your arms that his breath stopped. I had never before seen such a mortal struggle between men, as fierce as any between the wildest beasts. Of course, I knew that you were a wrestler. But I did not know that you were a tiger. I had heard that you had killed Raksasas like Hidimba and Baka. But I had no direct knowledge of the Raksasas and their nature. Why did you smash the ribs even when you had choked his breath and laid him low on the ground, lying on his back? After you pulverised his bones, why did you tear his skin? Were you not aware that he was already dead? Didn't your anger-filled ears hear Arjuna saying, 'Bhima, stop it, he is dead.' You don't even remember having done all this! Later when I tried to kindle your memory, you failed to recollect. I know why you did that. You tore his chest apart. From that moment, all that was in this Krishne's heart began to flow to you. From the day Arjuna brought Subhadra, my heart turned into emptiness. It became an uninhabited cave, which none bothered to buy or sell! Once Arjuna had been exiled from my heart, I had no idea that anyone else would occupy it. Draupadi is a doomed, ill-fated woman. I who was suffering from the misfortune of being rejected by a husband, was worrying to death, little knowing that there was a worthy successor like you.

"How can I tell you all this? This Krishne is bound by duty, by vows, by Dharma, and God knows what else! Mother-in-law who had accompanied me to the outskirts of the town on the eve of our journey to the forest, had taken me alone behind a tree, hugging me to her bosom in tears, and then said, 'Daughter, do not reject Dharma because he was foolish enough to gamble. It is natural that now you should feel more attracted to Bhima. But do not forget your vow of treating all the five brothers with equal attention, and preserve the unity of the five fingers.' Vidura who had followed us also said the

same thing to the four brothers. He said, ‘None of you should say a single harsh word to Dharma. He is the location of the unity of all you five brothers.’

"When I surrendered myself totally to Arjuna, I didn’t openly tell him about it. But when I got the turn to be with him after four nights, the whole night my entire body, my hands, arms, face and eyes spoke eloquently what my tongue could not say. But in this exile, abstention from sex was very strictly observed. It applied to me, to all, and it was an integral part of our life in exile. Perhaps it was Duryodhana’s intention to condemn me, to a famine of frustrated sex! Was it his conspiracy to see that in these thirteen years of exile the Pandavas wasted their youth and I exhausted my power of menstruation, and thus all of us would be totally impotent! Five years of overindulgence. Then a loveless period in annual rotation. During the pre-middle age period when sex can be fully and best enjoyed we were forced to suffer a famine of sex due to exile in the forest. It was then that genuine love sprouted in this Krishne. And there was no way I could tell him about it. He is a male elephant, insensitive to the subtle nuances in gestures of love. Krishne is no barren woman who blocks the flow of love with dry mud! Bhima who was till then served by the servant-maids when they had the kingdom, now came to be served by me alone from that day. These hands of mine have had the good fortune of feeding him even when he said he had enough, with the meat of the animals he had hunted and the roots and fruits he had collected after digging deep with his hands, after cooking them. I have let his sleeping head rest with comfort on my lap as he breathed long In the cool shade of the tree in the sun’s heat. Thus my lap reached its fulfillment. If I said, ‘Bhima, I smell the scent of Saugandhika flower somewhere here, and it is so lovely then he would say, ‘Krishne, you seem to be eager to wear it in your hair, so wait, I shall fetch it for you.’ Then he would rush off chasing the wind, crossing thorny shrubs, and rocks, snuffing out on the way snakes and insects, and return with plenty of the flowers. Yes, these tresses have felt pride in donning the flowers he brought to me after such hurdles. No, I was not wholly right. This Bhima is capable of responding to signals of love. Who but Bhima could fathom my innermost desires? None but Bhima understood my feelings when my legs ached through walking, when I tired through work, and when I became glum with sorrow! In a real sense, I set up family only with him during the twelve years of exile in forest. This Dharma who had been the main source of all my miseries ceased to talk to me face to face, of his own accord. Even when I tried to assuage his self-contempt, he refused to be drawn into any exchange of words. Arjuna remained very practical and routine after I called his bluff and told him bluntly that his show of love, after he brought Subhadra, was just a mere show. Nakula and Sahadeva found it

embarrassing to be served by me. I had focussed all my service and devotion on Bhima. In fact, I transgressed my mother-in-law's command. The other four could easily see that Panchali's love and attention were not equally distributed between the five. If the desire is not equal, how can love be equal? Whether the Kauravas returned us the kingdom or not, that they must be destroyed, was a vow only with Bhima. Who else among the other four had such firm commitment?

He had it. When a stranger molested his wife, that commitment without evasion and prevarication to kill him. Without making the mind an instrument for balancing. If the anger is not natural and spontaneous in such a situation, how can the love of a person involved be deep? Bhima who would refuse to be provoked if anyone used words of contempt in dealing with him, would refuse to tolerate even the mildest insult to his wife. What greater proof of a husband's love for a wife can be there? The spontaneous anger that arose in Bhima when Jayadratha carried me off or Keechaka tried to posses me by force, was not experienced by the other Pandavas. The masculine fury did not touch them. They did not treat the insult as their own and burst into fury. Jayadratha who was forty years old was on his way to some Svayamvara, accompanied by one or two kings. There were chariots and horses with them on the border of the forest. In spite of having a thirty-four year old wife, he had a craze to attend all Svayamvaras! It was absolutely right that Subhadra imposed on Arjuna restriction against his attending Svayamvaras. Well, one shouldn't attend a Svayamvara after marriage and one shouldn't receive from a defeated king, a woman as a gift. She was right in insisting on these conditions. They should be extended to all Aryan rulers. Jayadratha had certainly not arrived there losing his way. He had heard about my beauty, but had not seen me. Right at the start of the forests where no chariot could really go, he had stopped his chariot, and had come with a few body-guards to where we were. He was a relation anyway. He was the husband of Dussala, Gandhari's daughter. He must have calculated that Dharma would accept his arrival as a kindly gesture to enquire about their welfare! Wouldn't he extend his hospitality to such a one? First, he had sent words about his visit through his friend Kotikasya, saying that all the Pandavas should welcome their brother-in-law. But all the five were away on hunting. As soon as he learnt that Draupadi was alone in the hut, he came immediately to the hut. Maybe as soon as he saw me he went off his head. Couldn't a king turning forty resist the beauty of a woman turning forty-five? Wasn't it a year and a half later that Keechaka found me even then irresistible? That was in the Virata city. He had gone mad with desire, had begged me, and then, being refused, attempted a violent attack on my modesty. How I regretted this wretched beauty of mine! Even today people find it hard to

believe that I have a son who is twenty-five! They protest that I could at best be thirty. They swear by the name of God! Maybe there is no eclipse for Krishne's face and flesh... or moon like it waned every fortnight and waxed the next..." Then she opened her eyes, and saw the ageless moon showing his round face in the gaps between the stars. Even in the dust-layered sky there was an undiminished loveliness. And one could imagine how much more lovely it would be when the sky had been cleaned out after the discharging of the rains! As she looked up lying on her back, it appeared as if she was going up to him, and he coming down to her. The shameless moon was drinking her beauty. Then she shifted back to the past, "Jayadratha was staring at me without inhibition. I adjusted me saree, went inside the hut, and then came out. He surprised me from behind, holding me tightly in sensuous joy. He had a body out of proportion to his height. He had hardened and knotted bones. Unheeding my screams, he put me down and then tied my hands and legs. He lifted me on to his back May be he did not want to miss the sexy thrill my back gave to his lanky, stick-like body..." At this recollection, she laughed loudly. Then turned to the other side to see if Dharma, a light sleeper, heard it. No, he was sleeping soundly, absolutely silent.

"...I had lost my voice through screaming, exhausted, but he was sex-hungry to the point of being benumbed, paralysed mentally. Had he immediately gagged me I couldn't have screamed. If the priest Dhaumya was not cutting grass near the stream he wouldn't have heard it and he wouldn't have rushed in the direction Pandavas had gone for hunting, calling for help. Suppose before they had come, he had carried me beyond the forest border and abducted me in his chariot with body-guards? He had a body as horny as a male animal in its mating season. Perhaps Duryodhana and Dussasana who had given their sister in marriage to him might have rushed to the spot to fulfill their long-standing desire to enjoy my body! Of course, Krishne is an unfortunate wretch, but even so she had not hit rock-bottom. The last minute there has been some silver lining. Always a last-minute saving and this time the saviour was Bhima.

"When Bhima wanted to finish off that lecherous fellow. Dharma had intervened, saying, 'Bhima I know that you are not likely to care for what I have to say. Yes, I agree that he is a kicked fellow running after a woman who belongs to someone else. But he is also the husband of a cousin of ours. Not only is killing him a sin, but it will certainly bum the heart of his mother-in-law Gandhari, who is our aunt.'

'Revered elder brother mine, wouldn't the heart of our mother, Kunti, burn if her daughter-in-law's chastity was forfeited?'

"Bhima, you and I share one life, one way of living. How else can

what is within me become articulated in your words? Bhima was keen on killing him, and he said, ‘Look here, in my effort to bring him here alive, I have got so many wounds. I broke the limbs of the five body-guards he had and killed them. The rest fled. Had these wounds.’ The tussle went on between Bhima, opting for killing, and Dharma and Arjuna preferring to let him go alive. Eventually the compromise worked out was that he should be let off, but with his head shaved clean. Bhima used five of Arjuna’s sharpest arrows to tonsure his head leaving five strips of hair. And this Dharma went on with his endless rigmarole on Dharma, administered to his brother-in-law, Jayadratha. He screamed out the Puranas non-stop for the benefit of Jayadratha. After admitting his crime,bowing to them, and thus saving his life, he hid his head under a piece of cloth and made off in his chariot straight to Hastinavati. He embraced his brother-in-law, Duryodhana, and swore that he would avenge the humiliation Pandavas had inflicted on him. From that moment Jayadratha is said to have collected and trained quality horses, now made available for the Kauravas in their war with the Pandavas. I believe that by now those horses and his army have reached Hastinavati. Mother Gandhari’s heart, must have swollen with joy that her son-in-law was joining forces with her son. Dussala must have showered her husband with kisses because he had joined forces with her brother. Perhaps the marks made on Bhima’s shoulders, arms, and forehead, by wounds had not yet faded..."Then Krishne turned to the other side.

in the dust-filled sky, the moon stood still. Once she plunged into thought, her sleep vanished. She wondered, "What is the time now?" The days were sultry, and no sleep in the night. Nights turned out to be-the same, as now. Ever since Bhima’s departure yesterday, memories haunted her both day and night. No, not memory but thoughts. She turned to the other side. Dharma sleeping by her side sat up suddenly, as if he had a nightmare. She asked, What is it?’ He did not reply. She immediately got up, and fetched a cup of cold water from the pot resting on wet sand to cool it. He drank up the water without a word, washed his face, and then went to bed again. Well, that was how it was in summer. When the water in the body came out as sweat and became vapour, there was no question of sleeping. She, too, drank a cup of water. It was so cool and soothing. Then she went to sleep. Dharma did not get back his sleep after he drank the water. She was absolutely certain of it. She felt like engaging him in a conversation. She knew it was nearly impossible to enter into a conversation with him. Her mind turned to other, wider matters. She slipped back into thinking within herself, "Dharma thinks peace is possible. Even now he believes, Duryodhana will return us our share of the kingdom. Even if he doesn’t, we shall send an emissary to say that we will accept five villages, if not our

whole share. He holds that, if the share is given back, there need be no war. But how can the humiliation heaped on him, his brothers and wife be avenged by this? Even in regard to loss of our territory, he is not for full revenge. He is content with five villages. What can one do with a fellow like this, who will never learn and never change? Sure enough, he knows what I am at. And, sure enough, I too, know that when he opens his mouth, he will exude the stench of his Dharma discourse. Our talk ends with anger, fury, on his part, and, on mine, tears, nothing but tears. I am convinced that in this life he will never become wise. Luckily for us Bhima finished off Keechaka without his knowledge. If, by some chance, he had heard about the idea, he would have most certainly come in the way. Then Keechaka alive would have told us, 'Why didn't you send me your wife? And so you are my enemies, and I shall support your enemy'. Thus one more source of strength and support for Duryodhana in his war on us. If sex is kindled, it will end up in the fire of enmity and hostility. How Keechaka had sobbed, his eyes streaming tears, how he begged, entreated, and prayed, for my body in the beginning? But once I refused him, how he kicked me with violence and tried to take my body by force! And am I to blame? My body knew no old age. He was younger than I. He is said to be an elder cousin of Sudeshne. He was around forty or perhaps utmost forty-five then. The mind of no male could stay still when encountering me, my body and beauty. Has any male, excepting Krishna, resisted them? Duryodhana, Dussasana, Karna, Jayadratha, Keechaka — you just name them. But should a woman with a ravishing beauty then hide herself away within the walls of the palace, rotting unseen and unknown? Why shouldn't men stop when the woman says, no? Only Krishna is the master of himself, has absolute self-control. Yes, I should know. I have sat before him endless hours, countless days, talking. His looks, his eyes, his mind, his voice, his words, are all natural. It is all one uniform surface, with no cracks. It seems he was there at my Svayamvara. But he never got up to handle the bow, though he is as good an archer as Arjuna. I am sure it was not the fear of humiliation at any failure in lifting the bow in the presence of so many distinguished persons. On some occasions, defeat is no disgrace at all. He himself has frequently preached that defeats should be accepted calmly, digested wisely. He was the only Ksatriya in that Svayamvara who did not come forward to stake his claim in the contest. Anyway he is here now, and I shall send for him and discuss matters, at least talking to him would bring me some peace of mind..."She turned to the other side." ... The same memory persists. My miseries as a servant in the houses of all sorts of people. The figure of Keechaka, mad for my body, forcing himself on me. Those memories are like a flood which would smash and carry away in its flow every obstacle. Exile in forest was preferable to servitude in incognito. Certainly we had no civilised living, no decent dress, no sophisticated food, no

luxurious residence. But there was freedom, plenty of it. What could be more cruel than servitude for a person who had never been a servant? Not that Sudeshne was a particularly cruel mistress. More than the cruelties and kindnesses of mistress, it was the feeling of being a servant that was unbearable. What would be the feeling of millions who are born to servitude? Every beautiful servant-maid waiting on the king felt as if fortune had opened its eyes on her if only her master turned his eyes towards her! What sort of minds do they possess? To be exiled to live in incognito was virtually tantamount to a new birth, a new life. One must give up one's old life, old occupation, old relationships, and take a new name and start life all over again. Queen Krishne became a handmaid. Bhima who had the power to tame and kill an elephant, Bhima the Ksatriya, had to be content with being the cook, Valala. Arjuna took the role of a eunuch and became Brihannale, the dance-teacher for women and girls. Nakula became a groom in Virata's horse stable. Sahadeva become a cowherd, with the name Tantripala. In their new names they were all servants. In the end, Duryodhana had his way in reducing them to servitude. His desire had thus been fulfilled even if indirectly. But this one, Dharma, took the part of a Brahmin with the name Kanka and joined Virata's court as an expert in Dharma, and, as usual, gave his Dharmic discourse, without benefiting anybody. He has always been the most lucky one, always managing to get away with his Dharma prattle. Virata was also crazy about the dice game. Dharma, of course, has been married to it. I hoped that he had forgotten the game during the twelve years of exile. But how wrong I was! In the beginning he merely participated in the game as a helper to Virata. A little later he started playing with him, and soon they played without regard to time, day and night. He made Virata also intoxicated with gambling. I realised how true was the popular saying that gamblers, drunkards and lechers had the knack of spotting in no time birds of the same feather, no matter which country they visited. Anyhow, it was a period of exile in incognito, and hence I could not talk to him, as that would have revealed our identity. Maybe he was encouraged by the fact that I wouldn't take him to task. But he was under Virata's obligation. No matter how much Virata won, it amounted to winning his own. And only when Dharma won, was it real winning! Perhaps such pittance he might have won as a bit of consolation for one who had lost a whole kingdom in the game! Bhima had declared earlier — 'If after our exile and after our winning the kingdom he indulged in gambling, I shall cut off from his hands all the fingers. Then as a physically deformed person, he will forfeit his right to the throne. Then I shall crown Prativindhya as the king.' Perhaps he is destined ultimately to meet such a fate! He is a great moralist indeed, this Dharma who forgot his misfortune in gambling and wiled away one year in enjoyment! It was the sort of moral discourse that enabled him to counsel peace even when Keechaka kicked me! And how hard

he kicked! May be a man never generates as much wrath as when he finds his intensified sexual urge unsatisfied!

"How easily he washed his hands off, by advising me, ‘Sairandhri, have patience. Now go to your mistress. Do not act rashly.’ It is true that we shouldn’t violate the condition of incognito exile out of impulsive anger. Even so, is it all right to say this when a wife’s modesty has been violated and then slip away to play dice? Had not Bhima killed Keechaka and his ten brothers? God knows what would have happened to this Krishne’s honour and chastity! The day following Bhima’s killing of those fellows, Sudeshne got scared, and so was Virata, and they appealed to me, "Woman, we pray to you with folded palms, and beg you. Please leave our house.’ They also said, ‘We shall not drive you away against your will. Go when you will. But please give us the guarantee that no harm will come to me, my husband and children.’ At the same time, how many young servant-maids came to us, and congratulated us in gratitude, saying, ‘These brutes were giving us hell. Thanks to that miracle-producing husband of yours, we are delivered from our miseries.!’ Bhima, remember, behind you lies the strength of such grateful supporters. You are a tough one..."Just then she heard a humming drone. This sound preceded the crowing of the cock, as the cicadas flew around. Very soon it would be day-break and light. Soon followed the sun. Thinking such thoughts, she sat up. Drank another cup of water. Then she climbed down the steps, and she saw Jyotishmati sleeping in the open on a mattress of grass. Without waking her up, she went to the bath-room, made the tip of a neem twig into a brush, and then brushed her teeth. Then she said to herself, "Bhima, you have all along suffered in my cause. You have carried me on your shoulders in the forest. You have finished off all those who had inflicted humiliation on me. Once you kill the Kauravas, you will be completing all deeds of revenge for my sake. That is why you are now on the mission of enlisting the support of the Raksasas." She was a little worried at the possibility of his first wife, the Raksasas wife, returning with him. Then it suddenly struck her. She thought to herself, "When Arjuna came to me, full of desire, I refused him the pleasure because of the vow. In a huff, he went away and enjoyed the Naga and Apsara girls, but finally settled on Subhadra and returned with her." After thirteen and half years of starvation of sex, the other day when Bhima had invited her to his place at the night, she had refused because of the vow. Unfortunately it was the turn of Dharma, a tree turned into dry wood for lack of water!

Yet the vow and the rule had to be enforced! Bhima must have got angry, surely. Maybe that would motivate him to bring back Salakatankati, the one with the size, shape and power, matching Bhima! She felt relieved that Bhima was no Arjuna. Even after washing her face, she felt tired. So tired as to want to sleep then and

there on a mat. A mouthful of yawn. She proceeded to the next building where the children stayed. The children were sleeping on the terrace, where the flies buzzed. Yet she climbed the ladder. As she lay down near the mattress on which they were lying in a row, she felt a cool breeze touch her. Though it was day-light, the sun was already rising, the drowsiness that gave her relief, overtook her. The sleeping mind was muttering to itself, 'Bhima, my Bhima.' The memory was indistinct. She said to herself, "Let him bring his first wife, or bring even ten more wives. But let him smash that fellow's thigh and tear apart the chest of this fellow. If that happens, I don't mind going again to the forest with the children." Then she thought she heard Arjuna's voice. Where? In the street or near the building? She thought she heard him say, "What did you say?"

She heard a servant or a charioteer say, They left in the dead of night with the carts.'

'You said he agreed.'

They said that they cannot make arrow-tips, but can make nuts and bolts and equipment needed for a cart. When I shouted at them that, if they could make them, they could certainly produce the arrow-tips. After that they agreed politely to do it. But they have left. I returned to inform you.'

Wouldn't it be possible to chase them and capture them. They - couldn't have gone more than twenty miles.'

'Arjuna, they are nomadic people. Maybe they are really incapable of doing the job. Maybe they were afraid that we would take work from them without paying them. And at this time do we have the horses and men needed to go after them? And search these tribal folk? We still have to send emissaries to many countries.' It sounded like Nakula.

Then absolute silence. Then the crunch of footwear treading. She thought they were going to the pond for a bath. By then sleep ' had overtaken Draupadi. Deep sleep. In the sleep she heard .¡indistinct sounds of metal being forged. Then she turned to one , side and slept.

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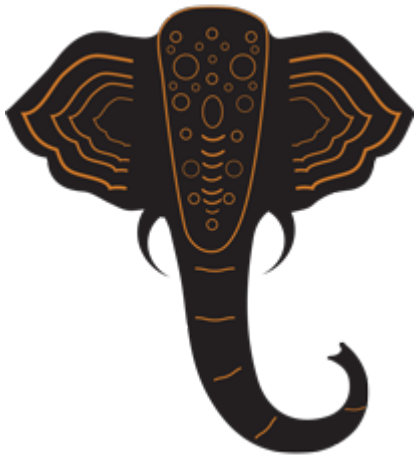
PART FIVE



Chapter

22

THE news of Duryodhana visiting Dwaraka to enlist the support of the Yadava army reached Pandavas. This created a problem for Krishna, Dharma, Arjuna and others, then in Upaplavya. Krishna, with his customary shrewdness, was able to see that Duryodhana was not merely interested in getting the support of an army, but also in breaking up the unity among the Yadavas in order to attract at least a few leaders to his side. The news arrived in the morning. By noon he had thought over it and come to a decision. It had been four months since Krishna had arrived in Upaplavya city after the marriage between his nephew, Abhimanyu, and Virata's daughter had been decided soon after the end of the exile in incognito. Now after these four months he was having second thoughts about the stay. He was aware that his elder brother, Balarama, was jealous of him. Balarama had not forgotten the way Arjuna had eloped with Subhadra. Krishna said to himself, "Balarama would not be happy unless he established his status as an elder brother by doing the opposite of what I intend to do. Therefore it wouldn't in the least be surprising if he took the side of the Kauravas just because I am on the side of the Pandavas." Krishna was quite sure that Duryodhana was planning to take advantage of this situation, and it took him no time to see this. Krishna told Dharma and Arjuna that he must hurry back to Dwaraka and attract the loyalty of those whom Balarama might have won for Duryodhana, back to the Pandavas. It was settled that he should leave in the evening after the day's heat had declined. For the journey, Krishna had his chariots, his own bow, arrows, spear and sword. No matter where he went and for how long, he always had his own body-guards with him. Orders were given to load the chariots with provisions needed for the journey.

After returning from the farewell to Krishna at the pond to the north of the city, another new idea struck Dharma. He argued that, though Balarama might still be harbouring anger against his sister Subhadra for the manner in which she married Arjuna, he might change his heart if Subhadra appeared before him and shed tears. Moreover it was an incident that had occurred seventeen years ago, and therefore might not be all that significant. Dharma thought it would have been good if Subhadra had gone with Krishna. By that

time it was night. As he slept with that idea in his mind, he arrived at the decision that it was best now for Arjuna himself to go with Subhadra to Dwaraka. It was burning hot. It would tire the horses. The route lay between rocky hills which exuded heat after sun-down. On the way, water was not easily available. The journey took at least twenty days. Yet Dharma decided that it was imperative to undertake it. With this decision, he got up in the mid-night, climbed down from the terrace, woke up the servant-maid sleeping below, and asked her to fetch Arjuna. Arjuna was not like Bhima, and he was capable of waking up any at time at the shortest notice. He was prepared to lose any amount of sleep. Arjuna who was sleeping on the terrace with Subhadra came down to Dharma. Dharma and Arjuna held discussion in the garden at the back of Dharma's residence. It was decided that Arjuna should leave the next morning itself. Arjuna got up, said that he would immediately alert his body-guards about the journey, and also get ready the chariots and horses.

Dharma who was yawning, said, "I have never set eyes on these lands. They are too far away, far away. Didn't you tell me that on the way lies the country of the Abhiras? Also you will have Subhadra by your side. Be careful. Take a sufficient number of body-guards. At least fifty, I should say."

Arjuna, "When victory is my companion, how can any Abhirs do any harm to me? I shall not spare the life of anyone who has an eye on an Aryan woman."

Dharma, "That is a self-evident truth. Yet let there be the body-guards. All the available flour was packed for Krishna's journey. Perhaps we may not have flour sufficient for your journey. It has to be ground. If we start preparing from the morning, it would be possible for you to start the journey by the next evening."

Arjuna, getting up, "You may go back to sleep. I shall look after all that."

Dharma climbed back to his terrace, drank water, and then went back to sleep. He did not know whether Draupadi was asleep or not. She was lying on her side. Dharma suddenly remembered Bhima. Wasn't it just the day before yesterday that Bhima had gone on his mission? No. It was the day before that. By tomorrow he should be in the Hidimba forest. Dharma was wondering what would come out of Bhima's mission. Then he yawned once .again and slumped.

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Chapter

23

AT the time when the reddish sunlight blended with the dust and heated up the air, with six chariots behind and six in the front, Arjuna and Subhadra journeyed in their chariot beyond the hill to the west of the city. Each chariot had one charioteer and three men. Each chariot was drawn by pair of horses. Only the chariot carrying Arjuna and his wife was drawn by five horses, all of the same height, shape and features, and all white. The chariots were equipped with Lamanca mats, adjustable against the burning sun. Their chariot with five white horses had to go through the dust kicked up by the wheels of the six chariots ahead of them.

Arjuna who had been silent, spoke, "Krishna's journey is definitely a day ahead of us. If we can go fast and catch up with him, we can send back three-quarters of our body-guards. And we need men to be sent to many places. It is not proper that we should take twelve chariots and so many soldiers on our expedition only. It may handicap our other ventures!"

At that time Subhadra said, "It is more sultry in Dwaraka than here. You sweat a lot but it is not hot. In the evening, especially after sun-set, the sea-breeze will blow, reducing the heat. In our Dwaraka, the fans never blow hot air like pancakes as in this country."

He turned right and looked at Subhadra's face. Her ears, neck and cheeks were all dripping sweat. She said suddenly, "You don't have there the kind of dust you have here." Then Arjuna turned to the left. He thought with a shudder that he had to go through a terrain of burning hills and for twenty days continuously! And then he would have to spend at least two or three days there. The tired horses would need rest. He said to himself, "No doubt the soldiers will not openly say in my presence that their bodies ache badly. In all, a month and a half will be wasted..."Subhadra interrupted, "Don't the first rains fall in Dwaraka earlier than here fortunately?" He looked leftward, worried that, if the rains came early, they would wash away the road and thus increase the journey time. Beyond the anticipated month and a half. Suddenly he remembered the past. The rainy season had been over then, seventeen or eighteen years ago. He had

taken this very route, rushing from Dwaraka with Subhadra at his side to reach Indraprastha in twenty-one days. The same ranges of hills stood on both sides of the road. But instead of spreading scorching heat, the hills had then been rich with green trees and plants and grass and flowers. What enthusiasm was there all the way! And she was there to his right. The same full-blown body with a magical face, just turned eighteen. Until Indraprastha, there was nothing but enthusiasm. Arjuna became nostalgic, "I had no idea of her strength until I brought her away with me. Eighteen years have gone, just like that, as if they were a dream. She had joined the others to bid me farewell, and all were there — Dharma, Nakula, Sahadeva, the five children, Abhimanyu and Uttara. Draupadi had said, 'Go and return. Let your mission succeed. Let your journey be pleasant and comfortable. Let not the wild beasts, bandits, sun and rain, bother you on the way.' That's about it. No tears in the eyes. No visible gleam in the face. It was the sort of indifference appropriate only when a distant relative was departing." Then Arjuna and his entourage had passed the first range of hills and were now at the start of the second range. After that there was yet another range. Nothing but bald, burning, high hills. For the next ten to twelve days, they would have to endure the monotony of the dry, lifeless sight of the hills. All of a sudden he caught sight of something in the lower portion of the chariot. His four bows were there. They were large, metal bows. There were plenty of arrows and spears. In addition, there were six chariots in front and six behind, each with four soldiers. He wondered whether all this was really necessary. Wasn't just this bow of Arjuna enough to handle Abhirs or Nagas or Raksasas? He felt he saw something running away in the hill on the left. Immediately he took up his bow, and shot just one arrow at the spot, aiming from the running chariot. Subhadra asked, "What is it?" Arjuna looked back, and reported, "A rabbit has been shot dead there. Charioteer, stop the chariot and fetch it. Also get back my arrow." The six chariots behind came to a halt one after another. The charioteer ran in the direction indicated. Four more men from the chariot immediately preceding Arjuna's also ran with him. It was there exactly on the spot Arjuna had indicated. Yes, the rabbit was right there, writhing in death throes. The arrow had got stuck in its under-belly. By the time they could bring it, holding it by the legs, the animal had died. The charioteer was amazed at Arjuna's skill and he said, "Great king, I had never seen anyone aiming an arrow so accurately from a of it. The rabbit is by nature a very fidgety, flighty creature, and running chariot. Not even heard must have been made more nervous by the noise of so many chariots moving."

Arjuna answered with a characteristic swagger, "Only after I sighted it, I took to the bow, turned back and shot. The aiming was not really all right. Where did the arrow pierce the rabbit?"

The charioteer, "Exactly under the belly. But wasn't it running?"

Arjuna, "Do you think a rabbit will sit as a target and not run? And do you think that Vijaya will shoot at a sitting or sleeping animal?"

The man at the preceding chariot not only added the dead rabbit to the kitchen items, but he also began to skin the animal.

He wiped the blood from the arrow-point and returned it to Arjuna. Then Arjuna's charioteer climbed into his seat and signalled to the five horses to go. When the chariot attained good speed, the charioteer asked Arjuna, "You referred to someone called Vijaya Who is it?"

Arjuna didn't answer. He kept silent as he wiped carefully the blood-stains on the arrow with his palm. After a while, he suddenly asked the charioteer, "What is your community?"

He replied, "The charioteer community, the Sūta community. I am pure Sūta. My grandpa was a Sūta. Driving chariots is our community occupation."

Arjuna, "Do the Sūtas of your Matsya country have only this occupation?"

Charioteer, "Originally I am not from the Matsya country. I am from Kekaya."

Arjuna, "That means you came along with the queen. Or..."

Charioteer, "Yes, yes, I came with King Keechaka..." Then he stopped suddenly, withholding the next words.

Arjuna knew the reason for this. The left wheel the chariot hit a jutting piece of stone, and the chariot tilted. He swayed to the right. Subhadra with her lovely face did not seem to have understood the situation. Arjuna surmised. He didn't speak to her. It appeared that in Kekaya, Sūtas even occupied the royal throne. Sudeshne was a princess from that community. What better bride than a Sūtas princess could the old fellow Virtata have got? The kings in those lands were all like that, none pure Ksatriya. If so, then would they be learning the vocation of charioteering? Arjuna asked, "Do the Sūtas in your land follow only the vocation of charioteering and nothing else?"

Charioteer, "No, great king. Making the chariot, repairing it, and warring. In fact, there is no distinction between us and Ksatriya. In our community, we, Sūtas, also rule the country. Not like here."

Arjuna, "No, that's not what I was asking. Yes, I agree that chariot-construction, chariot-repairing, and warring are all customary activities of the Sūtas. But ruling a kingdom is a violation of Dharma.

But there is yet one very important duty for the Sūta: To compose verses and sing in praise of the king, his titles, glories, heroic deeds, and propagate his name and fame. He has to memorise this material and then induct the younger generation into it. The young are drilled to memorise it."

The charioteer turned back to look as Arjuna's face with respect and regard. Then he turned again towards the horses. They were from the Kekaya country, and they galloped fast. Already they were kicking up so much dust that their manes had turned dust-red. The whiteness of their bodies, their backs and bellies, which had shone because of the washing at the start of the journey, had now faded. The charioteer thought that he would himself scrub them as soon as water became available.

Arjuna, "You asked me who was Vijaya. You must be fully informed about the titles held by the master you serve, and also the way in which the titles were acquired. Charioting is not just driving a chariot."

Though it was long after the sun-set and it had become dark, the heat continued to spread sharply. The shape of the hills became indistinct. Arjuna thought that the hills and forests were excellent hide-outs for bandits and other criminals, and then he narrowed his eyes to see what was happening to his right. Subhadra was there, her body trembling with the wobbling motions of the chariot. She was white-complexioned. But yet not so white as himself, despite being subjected to severe cold, heat and wind in the forest. Arjuna recalled that his whiteness was the whiteness of the ruler of the land of snows. All of a sudden, an idea struck him. Not only did he think the idea right, but also felt that if he didn’t act according to that idea it would make him inadequate. Before him; in the curving road he saw the chariots glide in a snaky-form. When he looked back, the chariots behind appeared like the tail of a snake. Only for a while. Then the road became straight. He thought that it wasn’t all right when the royal chariot, pulled by five tall, white horses, was followed by lesser chariots, creating the impression of a snake in motion. The idea that had occurred earlier grew strong.

Arjuna asked, "Süta, you didn’t tell me your name."

Charioteer, "My name? Tushta."

Arjuna, "My elder brother forced me to take sixteen chariots and forty-eight men. I gave this matter no thought at all before. What need is there for body-guards, when Arjuna is around? Now, do one thing. I do not want more than my chariot and two more chariots. That means eight men in all. And they are needed for cooking, tent-erecting and such jobs. We shall keep provisions necessary for eight

and send the rest — men and material —back. You tell them to go back. Maybe we shall have two extra horses."

Charioteer, "But there are all sorts of wild groups around, and they are supposed to go for Aryan women, and never let go an , opportunity to take them."

Arjuna, "Don't worry as long as Vijaya is there and Vijaya's incomparable bows and arrows. Stop the chariot and ask the others to return."

Subhadra intervened, "No, don't do that. Let them all go with us."

Arjuna asked, "Why are you afraid?"

Subhadra, "Not just a question of fear. Would it reflect our royal status if I visit my natal home with only two chariots? You, my husband, you do not seem to think of such matters."

Arjuna turned to the right to see Subhadra. Her hair was black, shining black. He wondered how old she was. Thirty-five? She was eighteen at the time of marriage when he himself was thirty-four. The charioteer was at a loss to know what should be done. The horses stopped, reading the signal. The sound of the preceding six chariots halting became audible. The chariots ahead also halted, realising what was happening. There was the noise of horses and chariots being brought to a halt, rippling the air. Tushta looked at Arjuna's face. Arjuna was clearly annoyed with his wife for opposing his move, and indirectly questioning his courage. But he did not want to upset her. He acquiesced, saying, "All right. Let it be as you wish. Let the whole lot go with us." As the charioteer signalled, the horses moved. Then the chariots ahead and chariots behind, followed suit.

Arjuna told the charioteer, "Look here. You remember that yesterday our relations from Dwaraka left for their place. They are one day ahead of us. If we can manage to catch up with them in two or three days, we can travel in their company. Ask the charioteer in the front to drive fast. He knows the route well, doesn't he?"

Charioteer, "It is already dark. In less than an hour we shall reach Vrikshasthana. It is the last town of our Matsya country. For the next half day there will be nothing but hills, shrub forest, and cheetahs. We can spend the night resting in Vrikshasthana. In the moon-light before day-break, we can proceed further."

Arjuna, "We shall halt for a while in that town to finish our dinner, fill up the skin-bags with water. And travel the whole night. There need be no fear when I am there with you. The important thing is that we must know the route well. Ask the fellow in the chariot in the front to light the torch."

Subhadra opened her mouth to say something. Before her voice shaped into words, Arjuna turned towards her and said, "Don't be afraid. Sleep secure. There is plenty of room in this chariot. I can stay awake even for ten days, without batting an eyelid."

Tushta shouted to the charioteer of the chariot immediately before him, to light the torch, and move fast. He passed on the message to the one next, and so on. Arjuna lifted the bow resting before him and leaned it against his thigh.

They stopped at Vrikshasthana and ate their meal. They fed their horses with hay, and then let them drink water to the fill. They prepared wheat flour and packed it up the next morning, supervised the condition of the torches attached to the chariots, and oiled the wheels. After that, they set out on their journey. Two youths of that town went ahead on horses to show them the way. The village headman had ordered them to lead the party during the night and return to the village in the morning. No sooner did they leave the village than it grew pitch dark. The hills appeared almost shapeless. Though the dust covered the sky, the stars shone bright. This stretch of the journey was enjoyable. Plenty of shrubs, and here and there tall trees. Certainly in daylight this area could have been lush green. But in the night all colours were wiped out by the pervading dark. The chariots accelerated. Though the road was not even, there were no stumbling stones on it. There was enough soft soil to show the marks of the wheels. Subhadra felt sleepy, and she started swaying her body. Then she leaned to the left and rested herself against his right thigh. She placed her head on the right thigh, and tucked her legs inward. Arjuna cleared the space in front of the stock of arrows, and laid her down to sleep. Then she stretched her legs to the full, relaxed and slept soundly. As the chariot made wobbly movement on the uneven surface, the motion provided a rhythm to her sleep. Arjuna sat holding a huge bow in a ready-to-shoot posture. By his side stood piled up his sharp arrows. But the bow-string had not been tensed and made tau t. He asked himself, why tune the bow for a job as easy as batting the eyelid? In any case, when did they expect the attack? If a tiger, cheetah or a bear were to attack them, they might provide good hunting material. But even that was not likely because the noise of the chariots would scare them away. Arjuna was aware that an expert archer was one who could take accurate aim not only by sighting the target but also by hearing the target. He knew that most people thought that he aimed and hit successfully the fish-contraption to win Panchali, by using his eyes only. They did not know that it was a more complex business. There was water below in which lay fish-shaped wood. The arrow was to go through the space between the teeth of the wheels revolving below the fish. The water showed the reflection, but it was equally necessary to spot the wheels below, not accessible to sight. Had his ears not caught the sound of

the wheels, his aim would have been useless. He remembered his Guru telling them repeatedly that unless one masters the aural sensitivity, one had not mastered archery. How true it was! Arjuna fell into a monologue, "If in the night, while eating the meal, the wind had not blown away the lamp, I wouldn't have understood the point, perhaps. Even in the dark, how does the hand unerringly take the food to the mouth? Is it a matter of mere habit? The essence of the matter is perfect synchronisation — the sighting of the target, the tensing of the bow in response, the pulling back of the arrow, the accuracy of aim and direction, the movement of the arrow, the piercing of the target, all these separate acts must occur at the same time, fused into a single act. The Guru used to say that no mastery of archery was possible unless sight, shoulder, fingers, all converge on a single point, condense into a single movement. Only Arjuna attained this mastery. It was a tall tree, very tall. How tall? Tall with the tallness of hundred years. Like a grandfather. At the tip of its highest branch, visible through the slits in the foliage, perched a vulture. Difficult to sight unless one concentrated on it. Otherwise one could be deceived as to its presence. Sky-high. There were sharp sun-rays to deflect the sight. The Guru had said, 'Princes, get ready with your bows to shoot, have the arrow positioned against the taut string, all set with aimed arrow. That person whose name I shall utter should shoot. He whose arrow fells the vulture, will be declared the winner[7]. Concentration. Arjuna's concentration. In learning and training. In operation and achievement. If the Guru taught one item, I picked up a hundred through hard effort. The same concentration and co-ordination of eyes, shoulder and fingers, both while awake and while dreaming. While standing, as well as sitting. Before sixteen my right arm, right shoulder, right chest, subjected continuously to the pressure of the bow-string had bled, then dried up, leaving scars. Even now the scars are there." Arjuna passed his hand over the scars. The skin had hardened and turned insensitive where the scars had been made. It had been so difficult to cover the scars in Ekachakra city when he had donned the new role of a Brahmin. Drona who had never embraced a disciple, had embraced Arjuna and told him, "Child, Arjuna, just as a disciple seeks his Guru, the Guru also is anxious to seek a worthy disciple, one who can enhance his fame and name. You are the only disciple who can spread my name far and wide. Let your capacity for concentration increase. Put in more effort and training. Persist in perfecting your aim. Try to handle larger bows. Practise hard the ability to shoot your target at a distance where your vision fails. An arrow is not meant just to go and pierce. It should cut the target with a sharpness exceeding that of an axe. There should be a separate type of arrow named after you as Arjuna arrow." He had added, "Hereafter I shall not be able to show you tricks by using bow and arrows. I shall merely orally tell you how to shoot, pointing out cause and effect. You should concretise them and

practise hard till you attain mastery." It had been more than thirteen years since he had seen his Guru. Arjuna was told that his Guru was reasonably healthy, and yet he bore an emaciated face. His son, though born a Brahmin, had a Ksatriya. nature and temperament. Drona's main worry was that his son lacked discipline over himself, like the Ksatriyas. It seemed Drona had joined the cow-catching expedition, and then he had occasion to see Arjuna. But Arjuna himself could not take a good look at him. Arjuna decided that he must somehow manage to see him after returning from Dwaraka. Must touch the master's feet.

The road appeared to slope down sharply. The charioteer held the reins tight, releasing them only slowly and bit by bit. After passing small rocks, they reached a level road. Then they speeded up. They removed the Lamanca coverings of the chariots, so that r the sky became visible all round. Here and there the horizon was interrupted by hills. The dust-filled air prevented them from having a clear idea of the position of the stars. Arjuna sat down, staring intensely at the stars dimly shining in the direction of his right shoulder. Suddenly he said to himself, "Let the war start. I shall dazzle the world with a display of archery never before seen by man. Even before one has sighted Arjuna, his arrows should make a mince-meat of his targets. Just ten arrows from Arjuna will suffice to throw the whole army into chaos and commotion. Heralds would compose songs about his wizardry in archery and future generations of Ksatriyas would sing those songs in rapture. Arjuna's name should become immortal. It should be eternal like the stars twinkling in the sky. At the end of the war, my Guru Dronacharya should embrace me and say, 'Your skill in archery has exceeded even my wildest imagination. Today in the Vedas old Indra's name is celebrated in song. Let the future generations chant your name and glory. I shall personally compose four verses to your glory and add them to the Vedas.' Who is braver and more heroic than Indra? Who is greater than him? Don't the warriors enter the battle-field only after offering worship to Indra? Only then do they believe that there will be no defeat, and that death would dare not come near them. Indra, weren't you the one who enabled Raja Sudasa to attain victory in the Dasharajna battle? Wasn't it you, pleased with the panegyric showered on you by Trutsus, drove Sudasa's enemies to drown in the Parusni river? Let mine be the name that will spell victory in the Dhritarashtra war that is to come. God knows from how many lands armies and kings will come to fight in this war! Maybe never before had Aryavarta seen as mighty a war as this ! Suppose I were the one to bring victory in such a momentous war! It seems I was born to the semen of Indra, of the Deva clan. Indra, I have been associated with your name right from birth. Bless me so that I shall rise to the height of your name. I am your son. Let the war occur if only to enable me

to attain name and fame! Let it be waged on a vast scale." Thus with ideas of such personal ambition and aspiration, Arjuna closed his eyes. The howling of the jackals from beyond the distant hills; to the right, dense cluster of palasa trees, the whirring of chariot wheels, the bustle of the horses, remained outside his awareness, as he was deeply absorbed in self-glorification.

After a short while, moonlight appeared. Though the hills exuded the heat absorbed in the day, the moonlight gave a feeling of coolness. The attention of men, earlier focussed on their bodies in the dark, now turned to the enchantment of the moonlight outside. Arjuna changed his posture from battle readiness to relaxed sitting. The sense of danger and the need to use the bow and arrows, lessened. When the moonlight became bright enough to reveal distinctly the whiteness of the horses, the charioteer turned his head back, and said, "Great King, why should you sit awake when we are there to protect you? Please go to sleep in this cool air."

The body of the moon appeared to be covered with the dust kicked up by the wind. Arjuna who thought that the dust could not wash away without rain, said, "I can stay without sleep for eight to ten days without showing any sign of dullness?"

The charioteer spoke no further. He turned towards his horses. The horses were going their way following the chariots in the front. Arjuna could sense that the charioteer was dozing off. He ignored the charioteer's lapse. He said to himself, "Wasn't it when I hit the fish-contraption at Panchali's Svayamvara that I got the reputation of being the best archer in the whole of Aryavarta? And how many years ago was it? It must be over twenty-six years ago. Now it is all old story! The old would have forgotten and the young would have no direct access to it. Let this war occur, everybody will come to know what is the prowess of Arjuna's shoulder, his supreme mastery in weaponry, his incredible skill. Thanks to the foundation laid by the Guru. But even the Guru does not know how much subsequent effort and discipline have gone into this mastery. And there had been no occasion to demonstrate it. This Arjuna did not waste the twelve years in the exile in the forest, at least not entirely. The first six years were spent in hunting wild animals — the flying birds, the deer fleeing at distance, and the rarely tracked tigers and cheetahs. How vast was this accomplishment? Dharma had one weakness, gambling, but he was otherwise eminently wise. He had said, 'Arjuna, if there is going to be a war in the future, it would be through your effort that we shall win it. No doubt, what your Guru has taught is immense, but we may have to counter numerical strength with our strength in quality. Therefore, from here you proceed to the Himalayas, and climb them. You know about a tribe called the Kiratas, hunters? It seems they are capable of waking up a sleeping lion with an arrow

and then put it back to sleep with their arrow! Cultivate friendship with some of them and then imbibe their great skill and artistry in archery. Then go to the land of the Deva people who produced us, the Pandavas. Their Indra is your father. Their religious teacher is said to be my father. Their army chief, Bhima's father. Don't you remember mother telling us this? Once they know about the relationship, they will surely come forward to teach you the arts of warfare. The Deva people know all the ancient knowledge of our Aryan people. They are especially excellent in long-range archery. Standing on the peak of the mountain, they can hit with deadly accuracy any target at the foot of the mountain, however indistinct it may happen to be.' It's true that my Guru taught me, but can it be said to be adequate and impenetrable enough? Would the Guru's teaching have been effective without my own devoted endeavour? This question leads me to go into the issue of training versus learning, the Guru's instruction versus the disciple's industry. Along with me were many other disciples. But why didn't any one of them attain my mastery in archery? Well, they lacked the hard work Arjuna had put in, and lacked his concentrated effort. In my mind, I began to exaggerate the importance of disciple's effort vis-a-vis the Guru's teaching. Yet my mind did keep on saying that one must show devotion to a Guru who loves his disciple. In fact, it was from Dharma that the idea that I should pick up special skills from the hunting tribe and the land of the Devas first originated. Who else but he could have had such far-sight? I recall that he took me to the bank of the stream and advised, 'In courage, power, and knowledge of Dharma, you have no equal. Nakula and Sahadeva are just children, They look it too. They are incapable of individual initiative. You alone are my true younger brother in this regard. Bhima can rush directly and fight. If at all Duryodhana is going to return us our territory, it shall be only through the display of your archery, and his fear of it. But Bhima's combat remains at the level of the beasts.' It is through the shooting of the arrows from a distance that one can drive confusion in the enemy ranks. The arrow is mightier than direct physical combat. Well, Dharma knows the significance and value of archery. How can Bhima who is fond of such crude weapons as branches of trees, or boulders, all proper for barbarian tribes in the forest, appreciate the importance of archery? Does he know the strategy and skill of warfare, this Bhima who promises to take revenge on Kauravas by pulverising the progeny of Dhritarashtra with his club? How can one push forward with a club against the rain of arrows coming from the enemy? Crude weapons, clubs. Crude words. Is war nothing cruder than turning to pulp a banana trunk? No, it is art and skill. It needs artistry and wizardly which would stun those watching it or hearing of it, making them wonder with their finger on the nose!"

It was a clear milk-white moonlight. For some distance, there was a

stretch of plain land without hills. In the far distance, climbing above the hills and beyond them, in the plain land, moonlight filled the space as if it were an empty vessel. Suddenly Arjuna felt that the dust and noise kicked up by the horses was upsetting the settled shape of the moonlight. He felt like asking the charioteers to stop fora moment. Suppose they asked him why, he had no answer. Of course, it was likely that none would ask any questions. Yet, they might tell themselves that he had gone out of his head! That thought made him keep silent, and he cast his eyes around. Here, too, the heat wasn't much. The silent moonlight had cooled the air. The scene gave him a sense of contentment transcending waking and sleeping. Suddenly he remembered something and shouted, "Charioteer, Tushta." Realising that he was half-awake, Arjuna gently touched him with an arrow. He woke up suddenly, scared and looked back towards Arjuna. Arjuna asked him, "Is there any kind of Soma drink?"

Tushta answered, "It seems they have a drink extracted from the Bhutale tree. Not a drink made of pure Soma creeper. They provided us with a bagful of it at Vrikshasthana. It may have soured due to the heat."

"Do we have milk to mix with it, do we?"

"No, great king."

"All right. Pass on a little of that stuff to me."

Tushta didn't stop the chariot. He shouted to the charioteer of the chariot ahead. He passed on the message to the one ahead. It had been stored in the fourth chariot and they had all enjoyed it the previous night. They poured whatever had been left over into an earthen container, and then handed it to the charioteer of Arjuna, after which he hurried back to his own chariot. Charioteer Tushta held it respectfully with both his hands and stood before his master. Arjuna opened the lid and drank a little. Then he remembered his wife sleeping in front. He thought of waking her up and sharing the drink with her. Like him, she, too, was very fond of drink. In fact, all the people of Dwaraka were fond of drinking. Not only those in Dwaraka, but the Yadava clan as a whole was devoted to it. From where he sat, he managed to reach and shake her shoulders. No response. He prodded her again. She seemed to be half-awake. She began to groan and roll. In the running chariot, she turned to the other side and slept off. Arjuna was disgusted. Then he turned angry. He realised that even if she were to wake up, she would drink and then immediately go back to sleep! He felt that drinking shouldn't be wasted for inducing sleep. He himself drank large quantities of the potion in two gulps. He thought it had become excessively sour. He dreamed of the perfect drink made up of freshly extracted juice, milk and honey. It made him feel bad to drink alone. What pleasure to

drink without proper companions! To get away from it all, he peered out of the chariot into the night outside. He saw the moon silently travel along with him between the distant hills. He saw the moon float imperceptibly from one hill to another. Even the horses and the wheels of the chariots seemed to have learnt to move noiselessly. Moonlight flowed in utter silence. After swilling another two gulps of the drink, he closed the lid of the vessel and placed it on his thigh. One needed a friend, a companion. By this time, Arjuna said to himself, "Krishna must have covered quite some distance! He always travelled fast. He plunged into any job with single minded devotion, unmindful of tiredness, day and night, in cold and in heat. Before others could even open their eyes, he would get the job finished. Had he been there with him in the chariot, Arjuna thought they would drink from the same vessel, letting their bodies enjoy the moonlight." Arjuna reflected, "After twelve years of exile in the forest, I was alone for one whole year of life incognito. Then my friend who arrived in Upaplavya was with me till yesterday evening. If I had been told about my trip a little earlier, I could have planned journey together with my friend, Krishna, as we were heading for a common destination. If only brother Dharma had informed me earlier, I and Krishna could have travelled in the same chariot, and then there would have been no heat, no dust, no sweating, and no stickiness. Even sitting in silence, with not a word exchanged, we would have been supremely at peace..."At that point, Arjuna's hand, almost unconsciously, opened the lid of the vessel. But the mind did not want it, and it saw to it that the lid was placed back. The moon who had been starting off from the back of the hills, appeared to be caught between the branches of a tree. The moon didn't come out of the branches. Arjuna felt that only she, Panchali, had the capacity to drink with him anything — toddy, wine or Soma juice. Arjuna said to himself, "For five years, once every five nights, she made me forget the cold outside, the heat outside, the sunlight and the night's darkness, flooding everywhere her moonlight, capturing me in her cage of words, defeating me but giving me a sense of victory, letting me fill the whole night with all my dreams, enabling me to suffer the separation of the next four nights, creating magic memories. That was Panchali, my friend and companion every fifth day for five years! When speaking to her, all my hopes, desires and aspirations would blossom and take shape. Once I was away from her, they all dried up. My fate became a barren waking up without dreams. Who was responsible for sundering me from my companion? For the feast awaiting on the fifth day, one could starve cheerfully for four days. But can one suffer four years of fasting in order to reap the harvest of the fifth year? She failed to read me right. I was not ready to call on the services of servant-maids overflowing in the house for bodily pleasure. I recall that from our childhood, mother admonished us, five brothers, to keep away from servant- maids, never even smell

them. She had asked us, ‘How can one have companionship with one’s inferiors?’ How could this Arjuna wait out the four long years of separation, even after acquiring another wife? Or why should she adhere so strictly to the vow of waiting for four years ? I am sure Dharma wouldn’t have objected if she had agreed to sleep with me out of turn. Bhima, too, wouldn’t have objected. Dharma’s desire is never intense, as he is mostly immersed in questions of Dharma. As for Bhima, his desire can easily melt into his perpetual body-building activity. Nakula and Sahadeva never generate intense desires. Didn’t she see that this Arjuna’s body and mind worked on a different norm? In the name of her vow, did she neglect me? Even to this day I am unable to unriddle her mind fully. She never gave me any opportunity to do so. Dear companion mine, you are an obstinate one, and you let me burn in your obstinacy. We haven't been able to get together to sort out this issue of your obstinacy, and settle the matters. You know, you have to believe me, all the enthusiasm with which I started out with Subhadra from Dwaraka evaporated by the time we were two days away from Indraprastha. Don't you know that in the space where your force dominates, how can anyone else intrude and establish oneself? When with depressed spirit entered the city and presented her to you as your sister and asked you to accept her, with what coolness and yet pride you embraced her! Didn't cry. Didn't get angry. Didn't show indifference. And with subtle pride you demonstrated that the new marriage did not have the slightest effect on you! Dear companion, that is why you were able to tame me. Now I can see things better, have a clearer understanding of them. The next day when I met with you alone, with what exemplary self-control you asked, "Well, didn't you finally realise your obstinate will? At least, you be happy. Do you think I was taken in by your outward calm? Do you think I didn't sense that your voice cracked beneath, despite its outward texture and that your eyes had dried up after being wet? You pronounced the final judgement, 'Don't lie to me that you are not happy. You were proud that you had a special right over me as you had won me bending the bow. It is always pride and conceit that lead to obstinacy, stubborn assertion. And then you just disappeared inside. Did I really have that kind of pride? Did I flee the town unnoticed because of my stubborn attitude towards her stubbornness?

It had been my handsome appearance that had stunned all those present at the Swayamvara — no, not merely appearance, but the details, the lines, the features, a commanding stature that exuded self-confidence. Then after the fight with the Kshatriyas who had attacked us, how proud I was to walk through the street of Kampilya with her. When we reached the potter's hut, the other four had lost their heads over her. Then mother called me aside and said, 'Child, though it was you who won the contest, what you shared, then it will

destroy your fraternal unity. I am saying this for your own good. Share her.' I replied immediately, 'I have no authority over her, and I am not greedy about her, and I am not greedy about her. Let these four marry her. I shall remain a bachelor. Did I become stubborn four had lost their heads over her. I shall remain a bachelor.' Did I become stubborn conquering my inner frustration and agony? Mother began to persuade me at great length, saying, ‘Child, if you take this attitude and talk like this, your unity will not continue. Don’t be stubborn in saying no. Share her equally. And not with bitterness.’ Can a person who is prepared to step out be called proud or arrogant? Can this great sacrificer who shared with others what fully belonged to him be accused of self-pride?..."

At this point Arjuna felt like drinking a little. He opened the lid and quaffed some of the drink. Then he remembered, "Who doesn’t get angry if attributed a quality he doesn’t possess and accused of having it? That is why I became immediately angry when she accused me of being proud and self-oriented. Why should she speak what was not true? Didn’t I leave the town because I wanted to surrender voluntarily whatever was mine to the group? Why did I leave the town? True, I was angry. But there was also a sense of self- sacrifice in giving ‘ up my right to her. I cannot, of course, recollect precisely what took place twenty years ago, the ups and downs of my feelings at that time. I myself do not clearly understand the whys, hows and wheres of my action at the time. With me then were a few body-guards and horses, and of course, the matchless bow of Arjuna. It was the age of self-intoxication, when one is thirty-one. It was the age bursting with self- confidence when one felt that one could win any Svayamvara anywhere in any corner of Aryavarta, win any contest by bending hundreds, no, thousands of bows. Even if it was a contest-less Svayamvara, when I sit there with my handsome looks, standing out amidst thousand princes, what princess with even a modicum of intelligence would garland any other prince but me? That was the kind of self-confidence I had then. If, perchance, the princess was fool enough to garland somebody else, then my self-confidence would assure me that she didn’t deserve me! I know that mother would feel the separation from her son, and brothers would feel the loss of a brave brother. And how did I feel about all this! I do not remember. Or was I then inspired by the desire to see new towns and cities, exotic countries, new hills and mountains, new forests and new rivers? Was it wander-lust, in fact? Who has seen as many towns and cities as this Arjuna? Well, he knows every detail about the entire Aryan world..."Then he closed the vessel and placed it near his feet in a corner. The bottom of the chariot was so wide that it did not wobble at the pace of the wheels. The moon was now right on the head of the chariot, and followed it everywhere, obediently like a devoted puppy. No, the moon did not stay behind entangled in the

trees or obstructed by the hills.

Why did I who had no set plan after leaving Indraprastha go in the northern direction? Why did I camp near Gangadwara where the river Ganga coming from the heights of the Himalayas descends gently into the tidy plains? Did I then have any desire to revisit the green pastures up the Himalayas where I was born and spent my boyhood? When I am dog-tired I remember those green pastures of my childhood. In summer there was shining, bright green grass, and in winter white undulating icy shapes. There were a few houses in which lived brothers sharing equally three or four wives. It was an unexciting life controlled by no sovereign, that they lived. Well, did I want to return to the location of childhood? But, of course, I never went there, as a matter of fact. I recall vividly immersing myself in the cool waters of the Ganga to get rid of the dust and ache of the long journey on horse, and staring at the range of mountains in the north. There was that girl, Ulupi, who had come directly to me and asked 'Handsome one, you look like the king of some land. Which enchanting land do you adorn as a ruler? Did you come here only because of the merit I had earned in my previous life, and for no other reason?'

"She was a Naga lass, and these Naga girls enjoy inconceivable freedom. This is more specially true of the Nagas inhabiting the hills and mountains. Though her father performed the worship of Agni, the fire God, as we Aryans do, they do not restrict a girl's freedom like we Aryans do. No doubt the Naga tribes in this part are slowly assimilating many of the Aryan customs and practices. While they permit their women great freedom within themselves, they consider any liberty taken in regard to a stranger as a matter of shame. To date no Aryan girl has married a Naga youth. Well, what is there in the Naga young men to attract our Aryan girls? But even if a girl decides to marry a Naga, would our folk spare her neck?" This thought made Arjuna feel proud of his Aryanness as he nodded his head to the rhythm of the moving chariot. Though he had been sitting for such a long time, his back showed no signs of bending or aching. The nerves and the bones in the back showed no indication of any wear and tiring. Arjuna continued his journey back into the past, "They were tough Nagas who could tame the wildest elephants, and she was the daughter of the chief of the tribe. Theirs was a house built of nothing but bamboo. Bamboo walls. Bamboo mats. Bamboo roof. In a bamboo mug there was lovely liquor. It seems they belonged to the Airavata tribe. With what respect and affection they welcomed me when their daughter had taken me home after falling in love with me. It seems Ulupi became crazy for me as soon as she saw me descend into the Ganga for a bath. Hers was pure desire, naked desire, unclothed with any sense of pride or cognitting. She didn't strike me as a bad woman, not one transgressing laws. My love

for her was like the love for a deer frisking freely and naturally in the forest. My love was as free as her natural movement. There was no sophistication or skill in bed, but there was plenty of freedom, freedom that appeared to be her very life-breath. My artistry fused easily with her natural freedom. She became mine, my slave for not only this life, for all coming lives. Yet there was this natural and instinctive desire to move freely like a deer. The lightness to climb the mountain peak and come down from there in one breath. Dazzling health! Right upto six months after she became pregnant, she went with me for hunting, moving faster and easier than I could in the hilly terrain. She married me before her father's ritual fire; and soon after she became pregnant. She became attached to me like my own skin. But all those who had accompanied me as body-guards were getting bored. For those who had started off with the idea of seeing the world, were getting tired of fun with the Naga beauties at the feet of the Himalayas. They started expressing a desire to return home. They were now saying, 'No doubt these girls of the forest have nice bodies, shapely and tight. But nothing like an Aryan lass for a wife. Good king, you do not seem to show any signs of leaving here. Do you plan to settle down here for good?' I was furious but within I felt the point of what they were saying. No doubt my animal sex urge was gratified by the Naga girl. But it wouldn't reduce my boredom. But then I remembered again Panchali's fierce vow. Here was the companionship which did not get exhausted with sex. Even when I watched her lying down silently, her body transmitted meanings. Panchali was no more a sex object, she was a person, a human companion. She continued to be a companion even after the sex frenzy subsided. Then I didn't see all this.Isensed dumbly the difference between Panchali and Ulupi. But I understood more explicitly the limitations of Ulupi.

How much Ulupi cried when I told her I was leaving! It is difficult to live with a person who doesn't want to live with you. It is even more difficult to leave a person who is attached to you. Had she delivered the child she was carrying at the time, it would have been even more difficult to get away from her! If my body-guard, Nabha, had not opened my eyes to the real situation, maybe I would have got stuck there! How much sorrow she showed at the prospect of separation! I was in a fix. I was sorry to leave but found it impossible to stay. It was a crazy situation. Once out of it, there was sorrow and joy joy at liberation. Once again to aimless journeying. What did I achieve in those six months of being away from home? Nothing more than satisfying an animal lust? Is lust a mere fat that will bum out and vanish in six months? Couldn't I have avoided this pointless wandering and returned to Indraprastha where I could have picked the most beautiful among the maid-servants or even added more beautiful ones, and wouldn't I have then had any girl for the asking

right at home? Weren't there the maid-companions of Panchali herself? Weren't there attractive damsels gifted to them by other kings as a token of friendship? Was it necessary for Arjuna to leave the town suddenly unnoticed just to get girls? But it was impossible to enjoy the servant-maids in Indraprastha. Because mother had laid down the law against it! Quite apart from that, she had brought us five brothers up from childhood on the idea that it was degrading to have contact with servant-girls. Thus mother had turned us into the chastest among the princes of Aryavarta. Mother was dogmatic about two rules—one, sex before marriage is wrong and, two, after marriage, sex with servant-girls is wrong. I remember once arguing with her on this, asking her, 'If what you say is right, mother, then why do they send beautiful servant girls with a daughter when she goes to her husband's home? Why do kings make the gift of beautiful girls?' Mother didn't answer me. Instead she cried. When a mother weeps and her eyes pour tears, where is room for debate and discussion? Well, it has been thirteen and half years since I last set eyes on her. Though she treats all her sons more or less equally, she does have a special love for me. She showed open and unconcealed love for me. She has sent us the blunt message that we can take her with us only after we have won our kingdom, that she would refuse to eat rice with us if we allowed her to live like the begging Brahmins that we had been earlier in Ekachakrapura. For firmness and for total commitment, none can beat mother..."Just then the path turned a little to the right. The moon who had earlier stood right on the head had now leaned slightly to the west. The moonlight began to fall in right earnest. Though the moon seemed to be expanding his size, he seemed to be full of sadness. All the horses became somewhat bewildered as they faced the light hitting their faces directly. They were already slowing down out of tiredness, but now they slowed down even further due to confusion. Sleeping Subhadra suddenly woke and sat up. For a minute she cast her eyes around in a daze. Her clothes, face and body had become dusty. As if recollecting, she said, 'Water.' . Arjuna filled a mug with the water stored in a wood drum, placed in a corner. He gave the mug to her. She drank off the water quickly, and then wiped away the sweat on her face, chest and the neck. Then she went back to sleep. Arjuna also remembered that he was thirsty. He filled up the mug she had emptied with water and drank to his full satisfaction. By that time she was already in a profound slumber. He came back to his seat, sitting with a straight, unbending back. The charioteer who had some sleep and was now fully awake, asked, "Great King, you have not had even a wink of sleep, I am put to shame."

"A person who is a ruler cannot afford to doze off!" Arjuna added.

After a while the charioteer spoke again, "Shall I beg for a gift from the great king?"

Arjuna, "Before our kingdom comes back to us, what gift can we grant?"

"Nothing much, really. In the war to start in the near future, can you see to it that I get the chance to be the charioteer of a great warrior? I learnt that you are in overall charge of the chariot arrangements for the war, " prayed the charioteer.

"It is one thing to be good at running a chariot for ordinary journeys. Have you had any experience of driving a chariot in warfare?"

Charioteer, "Well, I want to specialise in it. But you know that our Matsya country is a land of hills and mountains, don't you? In such a terrain, chariot warfare is very rare. Therefore till now I have had so little opportunity to do it. I have some background in archery. I can shoot from a running horse, too."

Arjuna assured him that he would do his best. After a short while the moon came so low as to stand at their face-level. Twice the charioteer turned behind as if to ask something, but didn't say a thing. Arjuna sensed his desire and asked him, "Well, what's the matter? Tell me."

The charioteer said, "I want a second gift from you,."

Arjuna, "All right. If I can give, I shall, certainly."

Charioteer, "Great King, when you return to your country, please take me with you. I shall look after your horses well and with devotion. I know how to look after the chariots, how to keep them in working condition. I also have overall competence in carpentry. I shall be content with whatever salary you are pleased to pay for my livelihood."

Arjuna, "What is your problem in your own Matsya country?"

Charioteer, "Shall I be frank?"

Arjuna, "Yes, tell me the truth, only truth." Arjuna welcomed this discussion as a relief. His mind turned to the chariot, horses, hills, trees, sky and the moon. The sky there appeared to be less dusty.

Charioteer, "I had said I come from the Kekaya country. I got married hereafter my migration. My wife and her parents hail from Kekaya. They have no male issue. Only one daughter. We all live together. My wife is more devoted to her parents than to me, her husband. She has reduced me to the status of a sturdy and useful male servant."

Arjuna, "Why don't you take your wife away and set up a separate home?"

Charioteer, "Yes, I tried that all right. But my mother-in- law and the queen, Sudeshna, are very close to each other. If I want to set up a separate establishment, the palace folk themselves will not permit it. You know, when you came to camp in Upaplavya city as in-laws, I planned to get away from there under the pretext of serving you, and I accordingly requested Nakula and Sahadeva to J help me and they did. I have not bothered to return. My strategy is first to settle in your country and then ask her to join me. If she comes, well and good, and if she refuses, I shall go my way and she hers."

Arjuna felt all of a sudden genuine compassion for the charioteer. He asked him, "Didn't you say your name is Tushta?"

Charioteer, "Yes, great king."

Arjuna, "I shall remember it. In case I forget, remind me. After we return to our place, I shall appoint you as my charioteer. Till then if Virata's palace folk send for you, I shall tell them we need the services of Tushta. Is it all right?"

From where he sat, he turned back to bow his head in respect and gratitude. Then he took the proper position and began to speed up the horses. Only the five horses of his chariot increased pace while the other chariots failed to keep up. Therefore, his horses, too, slowed down. The horses had already been running for long and continuously, and hence tired out. The wheels were now revolving slowly. Arjuna realised that it was not possible to make them go faster. He wondered how far Krishna would have gone by then. He also had doubts whether they could catch up with him or whether they should have to go all the way without his company. At that point, the chariot ahead came to a halt. Then one by one they all halted. One of those on horse who had come to lead the party and direct it came to the side of Arjuna's chariot, bowed to him and said, "Great King, if you stare far into the distance ahead, you can see a grove. To its right there is a village. It's called Jalasthana. As the name indicates, there is plenty of water there. In the hill near-by, water springs of its own accord. There is a pond whose cool water is inexhaustible. I believe the water in the pond at the foot of the hill has never been known to dry up. This marks the western boundary of Matsya country. We shall rest for a while before returning to our place. I suggest that you spend the day in the grove and resume your journey in the cool of the evening."

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Chapter

24

THE folk in the village gave Arjuna and his party plenty of milk, curd and ghee. Also provided them with fruits, vegetables and meat. By sunrise Arjuna had finished his bath and fire ritual. After that he had a meal which included rice cooked in milk, and cooked meat Then he went to sleep in the cool and comforting shade of the trees. After a while, Subhadra also slept. The others, too, slept in the shade of the trees a little distance away after they had washed the horses, cleaned the chariots and eaten their meal. By turns four persons stood watch over them in four directions, ready with bows and arrows.

It was some two hours to sunset when the party had sleep, a second bath, a meal and, after storing water for the journey, had made the chariots ready for the departure. Before leaving, Arjuna made enquiries with the village chief and found that no party had camped in the village the previous day. However, he learnt that the previous midnight some twenty chariots had passed through, set towards Pushkara. That much information was given by the village watchman. Arjuna understood the matter. Pushkara was three days away from the village. They must be the chariots of Krishna. Perhaps for tactical reasons Krishna must have mentioned the earlier destination rather than the final one of distant Dwaraka. It also meant that they had travelled at a much faster pace than Arjuna's party. Arjuna ordered the fastest of the chariots at the head of the party and asked those who knew the way to sit in it. His own chariot followed that chariot immediately behind. He ordered the other charioteers to follow suit and not slacken. The sun's heat was sharper than on the previous day. It was intolerably hot. Facing them was the sun in the west, piercing their eyes. To avoid the sun, Subhadra had the Lamanca mat rolled down. But Arjuna left his side open and began to stare out into the open. His charioteer, Tushta, appeared more enthusiastic than on the previous day as he sat straight untouched by sun's heat. Arjuna had developed warmth and affection for him. Earlier in the noon, Tushta had appeared twice in Arjuna's sleep. But he couldn't remember clearly the context of Tushta's appearance. Arjuna felt that he had fully comprehended Tushta's plight and that only he could help him. On the one side, a

daughter who was unable to leave her parents. On the other, Tushta's plight of living with her under the supervision of her parents. Though his in-laws did not exactly treat him like a slave, the situation had steadily made him perceive himself as a slave. Arjuna asked himself, "Who but I can sympathetically understand Tushta's plight?" Arjuna went back into a reminiscing mood, 'T left Ulupi, went east and found myself trapped again in Manalur. I visited king, Chitravahana, there identified myself as a scion of the famous Kuru lineage of Hastinavati and a Pandava, and stayed to enjoy his hospitality. Accidentally or perhaps not so accidentally, he arranged for me to see his daughter. I am sure his intention was that I should see her and fall for her. Well, as anticipated by him, I fell for her- the moment I saw her. My mind was lost to her. Was that girl, Chitrangada, really beautiful? My memory goes back to twenty years ago. Chitravahana himself was an Aryan King. His daughter's appearance showed a blending of the Aryan features with Gandharva features. Her eyes were sharply shaped and light in colour. Small eyebrows. The colour of her face was a mixture of white and red that had resulted in light and soft yellow. If she was not beautiful, why did I lose my heart to her tire moment I saw her? Or was I so hungry for women that any junk was a feast? Yet, even after the first flush, I continued to be attached to her.

Chitravahana argued, 'Oh, son of Pandu, I am overjoyed that one who belongs to such distinguished lineage, one who is a wizard in archery, and one who is physically so attractive, should have lost his heart to my daughter. But please try to understand my situation. I have only one issue, this daughter. I have no sons. The celebrated Prabhanjana lineage must continue. This kingdom must be saved. Therefore, I regard her as my son and look to her to perpetuate our lineage.'

'Does it mean you don't want to give her away in marriage?' Arjuna asked.

'Of course, how can the lineage continue without her marriage? But she will, after marriage, have to stay back here in the kingdom as its heiress. The grandson of mine born to her will occupy the throne. If you are agreeable to these terms, I shall consider none equal to you as a bride-groom to my daughter. If a warrior of your status becomes the chief of our army, this country will be well defended. I am getting old and my ability in warfare has. declined greatly. The Gandharvas from the north keep on bothering us now and then with their attacks. Once they come to know that a warrior like you isYny son-in-law, their plundering will stop.' Chitravahana replied.

Perhaps for Tushta things should have looked ideal in the beginning. He has left his home country and come here for his

livelihood. Maybe his parents-in-law who are working for the palace have enough wealth and property. And only child, a daughter. Perhaps he was initially under the illusion that all that property will be his. Of course, I had no such illusions. I wasn't interested in the throne of Chitravahana. But then what made me eventually to agree to that marriage? Twenty years have elapsed. At that time I had given little thought to the matter. Now even my memory is pretty blurred. Anger with Panchali, the desire to break away from my brothers' joint unit, just torment my mother by running away from her and what inexpressible urge of mad youth? No doubt, Chitrangada became my wife. She had surrendered herself to my strong and beautiful body. She used to smile appeciatively at my skill in archery. Yet I can assure you that she never became a lover who was prepared to sacrifice her all for my sake. I guess this is also Tushta's predicament. A daughter who functions as a son to her parents can never offer total surrender, total love. And this isn't the sort of thing one can teach anybody. She was possessive by nature, always good at taking. No good at giving. But how can one take without giving? Of course, I shouldn't blame Chitrangada too much. She had no positive points in her favour nor did she have any marked defects. The expected thing happened. She became pregnant. Like with Ulupi, our marriage didn't go waste through her menstruation. Has this Arjuna's semen ever been unproductive? As she became pregnant, I was feeling already a sense of loneliness. I had already developed a sense of distance from her. Chitravahana was awaiting the arrival of his grandson. The future heir of the kingdom of Manalur was slowly growing in her body. That was that. And what remained of Arjuna's in that land? The child out of Arjuna's semen, but without any opportunity to don the distinguished name of the Kuru lineage. Bliss for Chitrangada, bliss for Chitravahana, and bliss for his wife! How could they, gloating with joy, see the crumbling within this Arjuna's mind and soul? Chitravahana was a fortunate person. The very first fruit coming out of his daughter's flesh turned out to be a son. And what splendour and festivity in the palace! A grandfather ejaculating with joy, a daughter ejaculating with bliss and swelling with pride. And how could she spare any attention for me to find out why, amidst all this joy and bustle, I was so depressed and dejected! Would they have even taken note of my poor existence if at that time news did not trickle that the Gandharvas were raiding the villages in the north, and looting the grain and other possessions of the people? Perhaps the one thing that can wipe out even my worst dejection is fighting! I had the support of my own men and Chitravahana's ineffective army. And what a war it was against those bandits sniping at us from their mountain hide-outs! Yet my soldiers were able to capture some, surround the city of their king, burn the houses, and return to their mountain home. Do they come down to the villages at the feet of the hills and loot grain whenever they face starvation? My

body-guards, had a feast of Gandharva girls. Their women deck themselves elaborately, yet naturally, pasting colours on their bodies, decorating with fragrant flowers their hair at the back and the front, donning flower-bands round their arms and necks. Why can't our women-folk employ such artistry on themselves? And how colourful they look, wearing the feathers of peacock and other forest birds all over their body, the neck, the chest, the waist and hair. Thus beautified, when they dance to the melody of the flute and the rhythm of the small drums,how can any observer fail to forget himself and the world? They are people who have achieved the state of paradise excepting for the fact that their mountainous terrain doesn't yield food-grains. Why shouldn't they not come down to the plains and cu I tiva te agriculture on the fertile soil? Why not cut away the trees and clear the woods for cultivation? The burning bright sun sinking beyond the distant hills in front was a ball of fire, not only to the eyes but also to the sweating pores of the skin. Owing to continuous burning in the sun, the whole earth had turned black like an earthen vessel, and with plenty of dust. The repulsive sweat looked like the oil dripping from the hub of the chariot wheels. Dust covered the oil too. Subhadra who had rubbed her body with red oil loosened her dress near her neck and shoulders, and began to fan herself with a Ldmanca grass fan. A bit of the breeze thus blown reached Arjuna, too. Dark hair, like grass, nestled on her shoulders, forearm and knees, dripping sweat." The bodies of the Gandharva women were so clean, so smooth and hairless, "he recalled. At this thought he felt revulsion for women with hair, excepting on the head. He remembered that even the Gandharva men were relatively hairless. As for their women, they were virtually hairless in their bodies. Arjuna recalled that before his arrival Chitravahana had never ventured to attack the Gandharvas in their mountain homes. His soldiers were mortally scared of the mountain-folk. Arjuna remembered, "Only my soldiers mounted the offensive against them on their own ground. Didn't I encounter those five maidens near that waterfall? Those women who came with bows and arrows good enough to hunt birds, did they come to hold up Arjuna? As soon as they had a measure of the huge size of my bow and arrows, they became white in their face out of fear. But Arjuna wasn't a savage to go down to the level of shooting at them? Yet they demonstrated such exemplary self-confidence and courage! They told me, 'Beautiful-limbed one, we five have now imprisoned you. Put down your bow and surrender to us.'

'Well, I have come here to arrest the entire Gandharva population.'

They urged me to catch them,saying, 'Catch us if you can,' and then they surrounded me. With what skill did they hold me in their grasp!

I said, I have seen through your trick and treachery. Your men

have sent you so that I fall for you, and in the meanwhile they can shoot at me from behind a hiding spot. Let me assure you that just won't do.'

'Handsome one, no, none has sent us here. We came here out of sheer curiosity — to find out straight ourselves who you could be, such a handsome man, carrying such a large bow, and searching for something in our mountain land. We have been watching you first from a hide-out. We happen to be close friends who have played and grown up together.'

It was direct and straight talk, like Ulupi's, Why shouldn't I believe their words? Yet I decided to be cautious. I shouted for my body-guards. But where were they? They must be making merry with Gandharva girls, screening themselves behind trees or rocks. I couldn't control my laughter'..."Just then Subhadra asked him, "Why are you laughing to yourself? Why, what's the matter?" He turned right to see her. His laughter vanished, replaced by a grave look. She was fanning herself. Then he turned to the left, dreaming his past, "Hills and hillocks. Not the trees and grass that had burnt to ash colour, but fresh green plants that spread peace and contentment. Trees crowded with soft leaves, and flowers of varying hues. The noise of white foaming waters, cool waters, falling gently. Capping it all, five lovely girls, sweat-less, without ugly and unseemly body hair, with thin eyebrows, and limpid eyes. How these forest beau ties, uncivilised girls, made us feel that we were savages and made us feel ashamed, by asking me, 'Handsome one, all the Gandharvas have fled, scared, scattering in ' the hills. Why should your soldiers molest and ill-treat our women folk, causing them suffering? You aren't like one of these brutes, are you?" I had to shout my men back and instruct them in the elements of the art of love.

And they flung such direct challenge to me by asking, me, 'Can you take on and defeat all the five of us? Or maybe one of the lucky ones among us is enough to match your prowess?' What a challenge, no what a fascinating gesture! One against five. It was an attraction emanating from some primary pulse. There was pride in the words. One of them asked, 'Suppose you are the one to lose.' Then laughter. Then she added, as if to re-assure me, 'Don't be scared. We five have already been defeated by you. And a male who enjoys defeated females can never lose.'

It was a wooden house. Soft woollen blanket below. And stimulating liquor, sour, bitter and sweet. Generously mixed with honey. Three nights and three days. Arjuna conquered sleep. One after another, the lovely girls tumbled into my bed. Five in a row, and then again the first one. The five acknowledged defeat. All the five were dead-set on winning me with a concentrated and devoted

display of skill in sex-play, capable of opening floods within me? What exciting and provocative action, what incredible artistry! Even if this Arjuna were to do a thousand year-penance, he will not attain the bliss of those unusual and arresting details, fantastic postures we went through..." Arjuna smiled to himself but not without being noticed by Subhadra who asked him, "What's the matter? Why are you smiling again and again?"

He turned and stared into her face for a moment. He asked her, "Why are you fanning yourself alone like that?" She looked at him in confusion. She replied, "There is so much of heat. What else do you expect me to do?" Then he spoke no further. She took water from the earthen vessel in a comer and drank it rapidly. Then she wiped her wet lips and began to fan herself vigorously. The sun, the ball of fire, had slipped between the hills. The heated hills seemed to heat the ball of fire. It was so exhausting. How oppressive was the air! It was a tiredness that sucked all strength by excessive expenditure. The backbones had lost their ability to allow one to sit down after getting up. Deep sighs tore out of the body of one after another." One of the Gandharva girls said, 'Beautiful-limbed one, your men are waiting outside. Do you want them to be sent inside?' I was so exhausted that I had no strength to talk to the men who had come inside. Sravana was not merely a close friend. He was also intelligent. He understood immediately the situation. Using the wood rafters to make a carriage, he put me inside it to lie down. Then they carried me down to the green and grassy foot of the mountains. Had they not taken this action, God knows what might have happened! Suppose these Gandharava men had seen their enemy lying down they would have easily finished me off. I was so exhausted that I did not have the strength to endure the jolting caused by the horse's motion. In the first village we reached, I spent eight days consuming Soma juice, milk, curds, ghee, honey, maize and rice. Didn't I realise the havoc caused by my waywardness when everyday I was treated to oil-bath and complete rest? What did this Arjuna really want? Did he need those five girls who could engulf him in their erotic games and squeezed the juice out of him? Did he need the love of a wife who was successful in delivering a grandson for her father?

I told my friend, 'Sravana, we have had enough of this Chitravahana's kingdom. Let's leave here.'

Sravana, 'Maharaja, I had told you long back to think about this. Should a person of your standing accept the status of a doorkeeper of his father-in-law's palace? Yes, let's go.'

We had no idea of our next destination. When I told Chitrangada of my decision, she became dejected. She urged me not to go. But she didn't weep, didn't beg me to stay. But Chitravahana was worried,

and asked me, ‘If you now leave us, who will defend this kingdom from the Gandharva invasions? Suppose this son of yours will be without a kingdom to rule?’

I replied, ‘For your benefit I produced a son through your daughter. Now you take care of him and his kingdom.’ To this he had no reply.

Some of our companions who had got stuck with local women during our year’s stay, preferred to stay behind. When the rest of us left, we were not sure of our next direction. But the very fact that we had decided to leave gave us a sense of satisfaction in the brief interlude before departure. Suddenly I felt like going away all by myself. I wanted to be rid of body-guards and other companions. Luckily many of my party expressed a strong desire to go home. I packed them off with Sravana, and thus set out all by myself on a horse, my only companion being my bow and arrow. Before leaving, Sravana gave me a piece of advice, ‘Maharaja,now never get entangled with any more women. Every woman would like to use your lovely body and squeeze it to the last drop of pleasure’.."

It had grown dark by then. As on the previous day, there was the range of hills indistinct in shape in that darkness. The clothes, wet with sweat, had clung to the body. The noise of some insects in a near-by tree sliced the air. The charioteer ahead had not yet lighted the torch. Arjuna suddenly felt dis-oriented and directionless. The darkness was so dense that Arjuna could hardly distinguish between memory and reality. Well, that was the very nature of that path. Sheer dry hills. Thorny bushes and trees, tigers and cheetahs. However, he had not yet sighted a single wild beast. There were twelve chariots and people filling them. Maybe all this crowd and bustle scared the beasts away. Then they came across a grove. But just prior to it was a house with a light burning inside. The one ahead stopped the chariot. This was the small village he was expecting. There was a well near the grove. Water had to be drawn with a rope. All the chariots came to a halt. The village people supplied them with a rope and a pot. They watered the horses and then poured water on their bodies. They also sprinkled water on their legs and ankles. Then they sat down to eat the Cooked food, left over from the earlier halting station of Jalasthana. They drank water. They also showered themselves with water on the head, neck, chest and back. Arjuna asked the watchman near the well, "Did yesterday at about this time a party of twenty chariots pass this way?"

The watchman, "Not at this time. It was early morning. They were running so fast. They didn’t even stop to drink water. They said they were bound for Anartha country."

That set Arjuna to thinking, "This means the distance between us has increased from one day to a day and half. By now the distance

would have increased even further. We won't be catching him. I shall have to go alone now right upto Dwaraka."

The thought depressed him. He decided to sit just silent and let the horses drag the chariot. Krishna was not the one to be cowed down by hunger and thirst. Cold and heat, too, could not tire him. But what about the rest? His horses, the chariots? His men? But even here it was characteristic of Krishna that he was well-equipped. His men, horses and chariots were hand-picked to keep pace with his speed. He had a team that did not walk on land but flew rushing through air. Elder brother Dharma's mind was slow. If only he had decided things in time, then he would have had the pleasure of Krishna's company. And it was such a long way to go, too, and to go alone. Moreover he had travelled this way only once. Arjuna began to ruminate, "Well, that was when I was carrying her away as my bride." The chariots went on in a procession, those who knew the way leading. His was the second chariot and it was a relatively larger one, meant to be drawn by five horses. It was darker than the previous day. Had he travelled alone on a horse, he could have caught up with Krishna by then. But he had all that paraphernalia to reckon with." When I first visited Dwaraka, didn't I ride alone on a horse? From Manalur I made the long journey to Dwaraka, from one comer to another, between were so many countries. Deliberately avoiding the Kuru land and Panchala, I went through Kosala, Dasarna, and between, misdirected by somebody I journeyed to Kuntala wasting six days. Returned to Nishada and Avanti and what else. I have forgotten. What was it that I was after at that time? For one who left his native town, acquiring in the journey away from home, Ulupi, Chitrangada, and five girls in a bunch? In that aimless drifting all over the globe, suddenly I understood something. What I understood became solidified. That understanding, that realisation, was that one must have a loyal and consistently dependable friend for life. Arjuna lacked such a friend — this Arjuna whose physical beauty mesmerised women and made men jealous, whom the Gurus embraced again and again in appreciation of his wizardry in archery, this wretch Arjuna who had no wife to call exclusively his own and nobody else's, who left the green pastures of the Himalayas at the end of his boyhood and before he could spend his adolescence in which he could have found a loyal and devoted friend, jn the city of Hastinavati where he had to live with rivals within the lineage he failed to get the love and friendship of peers. In the alien life in Ekachakra city, too, he found no real friendship. But at the time of building Indraprastha, Krishna came of his own accord with chariots, horses, utensils, garments and ornaments in plenty for us, helped us in turning the forest into habitable land. And where else can one go now for that friendship but to Krishna? To whom can I unburden my agonies as a directionless wanderer, an orphan cut adrift from his

own kith and kin, excepting to Krishna? Well not finding my way to Dwaraka, I passed through many lands, arriving at last in Prabhasa. From there when I sent word to him, Krishna came immediately to me, galloping on his horse, and with what overwhelming affection he embraced me. Even our sweat mingled. I felt I had at last come to rest at home, as he listened with patience to my story of wandering and understood it — my journey from the east to the western boundary of Aryavarta, my lonely journey through hills, forests and foreign lands. He said, 'Arjuna, let's go to Dwaraka. Have no other thought. Spend four days in my company in pleasure, forgetting everything. Later I shall tell you things. Self-contempt and self-accusation ill-suit a person like you. When the whole of Dwaraka is at your command, why do you regard yourself as an orphan, one alienated? What's that? Don't worry. Nobody will ask you in Dwaraka why you are there without reason. Should anyone ask it, I shall assuage their curiosity by explaining that I had myself personally sent for the great Pandava warrior to help us wage our war against the men of Salva, menacing us. A great warrior of your stature and calibre is handy everywhere. Don't feel embarrassed in the least.'

"It was this intimacy that destroyed all embarrassment and this company that brought peace and joy to one's heart.

"What an enchanting city Krishna had got built! His house is on sea-shore, open to the sound of the waves. Visible from it are the huge waves, rising and falling ceaselessly. As I sat watching the limitless sea turning first white, then blue and finally green, and totally lost in the changing sea-scape, Krishna, by my side, would say, 'Arjuna, as you watch the sea with total absorption, I know that you are a friend equally absorbed in friendship for me.' Till I saw that sea, I had no idea whatsoever of a sea. When he was with us during the building of Indraprastha to assist us, he used to describe the sea — its limitless expanse and the countless waves which were born, which rose, declined and disappeared. As he remembered the sea, Krishna always turned inward. It is a treat to hear from his mouth a vivid description of the waves, his account of their birth in the endless sea, their exciting rise, their rush and smashing the shore and the final vanishing. His account gave such depth and meaning to the sea.

"Three months after I had set foot in Dwaraka, when I was watching the full-blown moonlight fill the sky and rouse the waters to frenzy heights, transgressing the shore, he said to me 'Partha (Arjuna), a few days after you run away from home, the memory of the home will torment you. But one's sense of self-pride comes in the way of one's journey home. The sense of guilt at having deserted home does come in the way. I shall send word to your eldest brother. Would it be all right if he himself comes here to take you back?'

"How like Krishna to have sensed so quickly my mind and mood, though I hadn't said a word, hinting of such feelings. Friend or foe, who can fathom their mind with such judgement as Krishna? It is enough for him to know that Duryodhana was visiting Dwaraka, to guess and reconstruct what Duryodhana might be saying and doing in Dwaraka, even his very style of speaking, what was the drift of Balarama's mind, and what specific impact Duryodhana would be making on the other leaders in Dwaraka. Should one go there and check, what he imagined or visualised would correspond in every detail to what was actually happening there. It was against the background of the sea that was hissing in the moonlight that Krishna divined another inner thought of mine—'You know that lovely lass who has seized your heart and mind now is none other than my own sister Subhadra. She is a daughter of my step-mother.'

"Wasn't I aware of the fact that she was his sister? Didn't he know that I knew? Why did he broach the matter in that way? Why did I become infatuated with her? The beauty of her appearance? Her skill and intelligence? Or was there something mysterious in her that attracted me?" Then Arjuna turned right towards Subhadra and squinted at her! The light thrown by the torch in the next chariot made her visible. She wasn't sleeping. She was sitting noiseless and motionless, holding a still fan in her hand. It was a sweet little face. Black raven hair. Intelligent. Slightly fatter than she was eighteen years ago. Old age had not touched her. Hair still black, still lovely. Had there been no light from the chariot ahead, the shapes of the surrounding hills, and shrivelled trees would be visible, though indistinct. Arjuna was now reconciled to the fact that, no matter how fast they went, they just wouldn't be catching up with Krishna. He told his charioteer, "Tushta, step aside a little and let the five chariots behind us go ahead of us. As yesterday, let us be in the middle of the row of chariots. The heat of the torch touches us sharply."

Subhadra intervened, saying, "Yes, it is very warm, "and then sighed deeply.

It was calm in that dark.

In evenly dense darkness, all shapes looked indistinct.

In that calm darkness, memory was becoming clarified.

Arjuna asked himself, "Why did I fall for her?" There were no boulders, no stones on the road, which was a mixture of sand and mud. The chariot didn't wobble. It swayed rhythmically. Suddenly it struck Arjuna. His mind was full of Krishna. His warm closeness. His ability to understand and sympathise with Arjuna. Arjuna mused, "A companisonship which enabled us to sit on the sand in the shore and dream dreams. How many nights, leaving his wives in the palace, he

came to the shore just to sit with me in silence ! Subhadra's eyebrows were like those of my friend. The cheeks, too, were like her brother's. His lovely black hair. His character, his gift for imagination. The intense hope and dream that if I married her, all my inner wishes would be realised. Yes, now I can see it clearly. I saw the brother in the sister. At thirty-three I could not see it. Vasudeva had many wives and children but none of them resembled Krishna. I am not acquainted with them. I was caught in a dream, after seeing her and investing her with all the qualities and features of Krishna. I told my friend, 'Krishna, please see that she weds me. I shall regard it as the ultimate bliss of my life.'

Krishna, 'Partha, how can a single girl take you to the ultimate bliss of life?' Then he laughed.

'I can't explain any further. You are not able to see the truth with my eyes. Tell me the best strategy for winning her. If you set up a Svayamvara, do you think she will choose me? If like King Drupada they hold a contest involving skill in archery, I am sure I shall win. Anyway...'

"After two days, he himself opened the topic, 'Partha, I made some effort to read Subhadra's mind. If a Svayamvara is held, there is no guarantee that she will garland you. If a contest is held, who knows what will emerge ultimately? How can we be sure that none superior to you in archery has been born in Aryavarta? If even before you take part in the contest she disapproves of you, you are out of the run. Didn't Panchali reject Karna in the first round itself?'

I protested, I am not a charioteer by birth. I belong to the highest Ksatriya caste. I am a pure Arya.' Krishna, 'But you are no longer a youth. You are of my age. Moreover, you belong to a tradition in which polyandry is permitted. Suppose she is worried about such matters, then what?'

'Krishna, I swear by your name. I am done with collective marriage. I want a wife all for myself, nobody's but only mine. Let your sister have no doubt on that score. She shall be wife to me, to none else.'

"I pestered him with my dreams of life with her after surrendering my mind to her. He took my side, and told me how to win her. He had to pay the price of antagonising his elder brother Balarama for taking my side. Krishna said, 'You see, day after tomorrow, she will be journeying to the Raivata mountains. Well, you have seen those mountains. On the full moon day she observes the vow of going ritually round those mountains. Timing accordingly, you pretend to go out for hunting, go alone in your strong chariot with its powerful horses. Choosing a correct mid-point, you shoot four arrows to scare

the servant-maid and the body-guards who will be with her. You pick her up in the ensuing confusion and, placing her in your chariot, drive fast towards Indraprastha. You must drive like a mad person. It will be your responsibility to defend heron the way. It needs enormous courage and determination. Now can you manage all this?'

"Then I had a sturdy chariot, like this one now I have. I had highly sharpened, thick arrows to be used with my four large bows, all meant for war. And the horses of pure breed totally used to me and my control." Arjuna turned right again. Subhadra was sleeping in a sitting posture. He returned to reflection, "I knew the route only up to the Anartha country. For journey beyond, we had to make enquiries. Krishna assured me, 'You just have to spend one night. After that we shall meet you and inform you of our decision to allow you to marry Subhadra. Then we shall take you back to Dwaraka.' In case Krishna's strategy misfired, I had the unenviable task of managing simultaneously the enemies chasing me behind and the horses before. I had to shoot arrows to fight the men behind while handling the horses of my chariot — both at the same time. If I had to jump out of the chariot, then I must tie up her hands and feet, and lay her down on the floor of the chariot." Subhadra was still dozing off in a sitting position." There was no day when she did not sleep. Only those who cannot dream will not sleep as they toss on their beds, and watch the moon or the stars, sitting up. That was like Panchali. On summer nights, on the terrace of the tall building in Indraprastha, as we both lay in embrace, there would be, up in the sky, the stars or the just blossoming moon, and, down below, the waters of river Yamuna gently flowing on a bed of trees. She was a companion who could pour ghee to rouse the flames of her dreams in my arms. Once every five nights. Sometimes even in bitter winter that stiffened one's limbs, she would wake me up, drag me to the terrace to watch the white moon, reciting verses to the effect that the moon shouldn't be left alone! She never did this with the other four husbands, never went up with them to the terrace to see the moon and recite poetry. Never with them in winter. Never had awakened a whole night with the other four. I was the privileged one for Panchali. Well, after I took Subhadra as a wife, I had no occasion to dream with Panchali. But Subhadra slept so much. Yesterday she slept the whole night. This afternoon in the grove, too, she had a nice nap. Now, so soon after, she had again gone back to sleep. The chariot is in the middle and hence the charioteer has really no work to do. Hence Tushta leans back and dozes off where he is sitting, as the horses go on their own, mechanically following the chariot ahead."

Arjuna shook her left shoulder and called, "Subhadra."

She gave a deep sigh and drawing her breath, grunted, "Uh."

Arjuna shook her again and said, "How sleepy you are!"

Straightening her body, she asked, "Why?" He could sense even in the dark that her eyes were still closed. Then she straightened up both her arms, shook her shoulder, and said, "I shall lie down and sleep on the floor. Move the bows a little that way." By that time her body had been re-tuned to the waking situation. She opened her eyes and asked, "What should I do?" He didn't know what to say, and he merely stared at the distant sky. There was a lot of dust because the road was sandy. Yet the carriage didn't jolt or wobble, but was steady like a boat floating on gentle wavelets.

Subhadra asked, "What did you say?"

Arjuna, "Duryodhana has gone there in Krishna's absence. What do you think may happen there now?"

At last comprehending fully what he was saying, she became fully awake. Arjuna explained to her again, "You were there for the last thirteen years, and you must have a good understanding of how the minds of different persons there work."

Subhadra, "Why worry about what everybody thinks? Krishna is mostly travelling here and there, visiting this town and that town. Even recently he was in Upaplavya city to do something for us. The Yadava army is under the control of elder brother Balarama who never goes out. Balarama hasn't quite forgotten the humiliation you inflicted on him by running away with me."

"Of course, "Arjuna thought, "there was no other way excepting to elope with her if I really wanted her. Anyway, isn't this a form of marriage highly appropriate for a Ksatriya?" Arjuna had never broken the tradition. Wouldn't Balarama who was so intelligent see it? Then he remembered: "Subhadra's servant-maid and the body-guards scared by his bow and arrows had fled from the Raivata mountain to Dwaraka. Well, they had to run on foot because I had broken the wheel of their chariot and twisted the legs of their horses with my hands. When Balarama got the news of what had happened, it seems he was in a rage. He ordered the drums to be beaten to indicate real or anticipated threat to the city, and sent all his warriors with their chariots, exhorting them, 'Unfurl your flags, get hold of your bows and arrows. Now there will be a war under Balarama's command. All should immediately assemble in the public hall.' The whole hall, it seems, was overflowing with soldiers. Outside the hall, rows of chariots were standing ready to leave. Balarama's white eyes had become red as they turned round and round. He addressed the assembly of warriors, 'Yadava warriors, this Arjuna who is guilty of all this, is a friend of Krishna. He spent so many days with us, eating with us, staying in our house, and now he has had the cheek to run

away with our own girl. If any one dares to run away with our women, we should regard it as an affront to our honour, a challenge to our male-hood. We shall chase this scoundrel, capture him and kill him. Then we shall feed our dogs with his flesh and bones. Or else how can Yadava male-hood raise its head in pride?'

It was Satyaki or Uddhava, I am not sure, who counselled caution, saying, 'After all, he is Krishna's friend. Let's send for Krishna.' Then Krishna came there slowly, and who can win against him in the wizardry of words? He said, 'Elder brother, if any one takes so much trouble to carry off our girl, it signifies that he has enormous respect and regard for the family of the girl. He considers them worthy of all the risk and hardship. What Arjuna has done does not mean dishonour to us. Quite the contrary, it should be seen as an honour conferred on us and our people.'

.Balarama,'Oh, I see. Do you consider stealing a sign of a noble, upright man?'

Krishna, 'Elder brother, when he was determined so absolutely to take her, what else could he have done? Those who come to a Svayamvara are there just to take a chance, to try their luck. But they will not have the intensity of Arjuna's passion for the girl. You are aware of how he had earlier won the contest at Drupada's daughter's Svayamvara. If we had arranged such a contest, there is no doubt that Arjuna would have won it. It is not late even now. You can call him, test his skill in weaponry, and then offer the bride. Can you get for our sister a greater warrior than him?'

Balarama protested, 'But he comes from a house where they practise polyandry. Five husbands to one wife!'

Krishna, 'Let us call them back, and impose on Arjuna the condition that our sister will have him and him only as her husband. After he accepts such a condition, we shall celebrate the wedding.'

True, with his words, Krishna managed to persuade Balarama to agree to my marriage with Subhadra. May be there was no genuine change of heart on his part. Then Arjuna asked Subhadra, "But all that had happened eighteen years ago. Isn't it so?"

Subhadra, "Why talk of eighteen years? My brother's nature is such that he will not forget any offence done to him any time till his death. Equally intense and steadfast is his love. So also his anger and hate. It seems after you were given Khandavaprastha, Krishna lived with you for a year or so. At that time I was a girl of twelve or thirteen. I was living in a separate house. How can I remember or know the details? It seems it was at that time that Duryodhana came to Dwarka to learn club-fighting at Balarama's feet. He flattered brother, saying, 'Balabhadra, none has been in Aryavarta who can wield the club like

you. Who knows whether in future anyone will be born who can match you? I have come to you because of the conviction that even learning from great Drona is incomplete without rounding it off with lessons in club-fighting from you. I beg you to accept me, therefore, as your disciple.' It was then that Balarama developed attachment and affection for him. It is absolutely impossible to annul this in Balarama. Fully aware of this, Duryodhana has taken advantage of it by flattering my brother from time to time. Thus the attachment has become thick."

Arjuna, "But would he work against the interest of his own sister?"

Subhadra "Well, how can I say? Also I am only a step-sister. There is a very wide age-gap between us, and we did not grow up in the same household. Didn't you know that my father had set up each one of his wives in a separate establishment? It is in the nature of Krishna to show affection even for the remotest relation. When all of you were away for thirteen years to suffer exile in forest and in incognito, it was Krishna who took care of me and let me live with him. I learn that Balarama used to ridicule you, Pandavas, saying that these idiots lost everything in gambling and then, unable to maintain their wives, had shunted them off to their parental homes! Not once did he invite you and speak to you brothers in affection. You were never properly hosted, even for a day. If Balarama is such a great expert in club-fighting, shouldn't he teach it to his own nephew, Abhimanyu? It was Krishna who took the responsibility and trouble to train his sister's son in the art and science of weaponry. It was Satyaki who taught Abhimanyu lessons in general conduct and discipline."

Arjuna tried to figure out the strength of the Yadava army. Subhadra was not particularly well versed in such matters. According to his own approximate knowledge, it was by no means an army to write home about. Moreover, the term, Yadava, did not denote a single community or caste group. It was a common appellation traditionally assigned to a group of different lineages living along the coast, such as the Vrishti, Bhoja, Andhaka and Shini, who lived in regions like Dwaraka and Prabhasa and so on. Every lineage had its own chieftain and its own small army. More than the size of the army, each lineage was known because of its individual warriors. Such great warriors included Satyaka, Satyaki, Kritavarma, Pradyumna, Samba, Nishata, Shanku, Charudeshna, Viprathu, Sarana and Gada. These were individual heroes without their own armies, Arjuna began to wonder how many among these were going to toe Balarama's line. And how many would line up behind Krishna? Satyaka was very old. Satyaki had always been loyal follower of Krishna. Pradyumna and Samba were,of course, Krishna's own sons. However, Samba had married Duryodhana's daughter, Lakshane. Was it likely that he was the kind of son who would fight his father in

a war in favour of his father-in-law? It seemed that Samba had tried to steal Lakshane, but Duryodhana had got him caught and imprisoned.

Then Balarama had to rush to get him released and finally arranged the marriage between the two, by threatening Duryodhana. Would this mean that Samba might harbour hostility against his father-in-law? Perhaps, in all probability, he might just stay put in Dwaraka, taking no sides. Kritavarma was reputed to be a close associate of Balarama. Right from the start. What was the current situation with regard to their relationship, he didn't know. Gada and Balarama were sons of the same mother. Yet it was known that Kritavarma had usually supported Krishna's position on many occasions. It was more or less clear that even if Duryodhana succeeded with Balarama, he would still not command the support of all the Yadavas. It was, however, likely that Balarama might give him a considerable part of Yadava wealth. When such thoughts were crossing his mind, the moon rose behind Arjuna. Arjuna turned back to see the moon. Right on top in the ashen sky the moon appeared lustreless. Arjuna did not feel tempted to stare at the moon long. When he turned his head to the right position, his eyes rested on Subhadra. She was still dozing off sitting. No, not dozing off, actually sleeping. He pushed aside the weapons so that she could lie down properly, and asked her to sleep. She stretched down to sleep, as if she had not a care in the world! She folded her legs inward, made one of her arms into a pillow, and then went to sleep.

The moon was becoming gradually bright, and the road was getting unfamiliar. Arjuna felt inclined to sleep, but it was not a deep overpowering sleep.

All of a sudden, Tushta spoke, "You know the entire army of king Virata is on your side."

Arjuna did not find anything new in this information. After all, Virata had just become their in-law. Moreover, he harboured great wrath against Duryodhana. He had already placed at their disposal a whole town to plan and prepare for the war, had supplied them with whatever they had asked for, chariots, horses, soldiers, food and other useful material. So Arjuna just said, "Of course, that is well known." Tushta was silenced. Arjuna did not say anything more. After a brief pause, Tushta himself said, "No, I didn't mean merely that King Virata was with you. I meant all the soldiers are with you, of their own accord. Especially charioteers.

They are all ready to die for your brother, king Bhima. I know for certain that they are all talking among themselves to join you in the battle and fight for you."

Arjuna was wonder-struck. Why were they all so fond of Bhima? Because of his archery? Attractive appearance? Bhima was attractive in a way, but he was too large and his shape was ungainly. He spent his exile in incognito as a cook. How did he develop such close relations with the soldiers? He didn't press for an answer. Somehow this bit of news didn't enthuse him. The chariot was jumping as it negotiated the stone-humps on the road. Tushta volunteered to elaborate, "You know our army chief. Keechaka. Bhimaraja slew his ten evil brothers single-handed in one night. From that day onwards, women-folk in our charioteer community have begun to listen to their husbands with respect. And all husbands have begun to worship King Bhima as God Himself."

At that juncture something flashed in Arjuna's mind. He felt as if he had lost his balance. Tushta fell silent. Arjuna's mind became empty, utterly empty. After a while he was tired of sitting. He prodded Subhadra and asked her to move to a side so that he could lie down. Then he tried to sleep. He yawned but could not sleep. He remembered. Yes, he, too, knew about how Keechaka, casting his lustful eye on Draupadi, tried to molest her in his chamber, and when she fled from there, chased her and kicked her in Virata's presence. His mind, too, had boiled. But what could he have done? They had bundled all their weapons and hung the bundle from the branch of the ¿ami tree some seven miles from the town. Well, he would have to go there and fetch the bow and arrows.... But was it possible to kill Keechaka with the bow and arrows alone? Wouldn't such an act have given away their identity? He discussed the matter that evening with elder brother, Dharma. It was decided that till the termination of the period of incognito exile, they should just keep quiet. Dharma told him that he had given instructions to Panchali on those lines, and it was then that his mental calm was restored: It was because Bhima had rashly killed Keechaka, and it was when this news reached Duryodhana that he suspected their presence in Viratanagara and then captured Virata's cattle. If they had been found out before the end of the period of incognito, they would have been condemned to another twelve years of exile in the forest and one year of living incognito! Bhima was very foolish and would have landed them in real trouble. This thought gave Arjuna mental satisfaction. Even when she was humiliated? Panchali did not go to Arjuna. The thought that she went to Bhima galled him, pricking his pride. Arjuna asked himself, "Did Panchali imagine that this Arjuna did not exist?" His side began to ache, and then he turned to the other side and slept. He prodded Subhadra, saying, "Move aside a little "and then turned in the space created. Bhima had maintained adamantly that even if their identity were discovered, they did not need to repeat the exile. That was also Panchali's interpretation. In disregarding Dharma, the two were equal. Arjuna plunged once again into reflection, "I have

been watching them right from the start and all through. Bhima has no commitment to Dharma. Panchali leaned towards his position wholly. It is ironical that this Bhima has now become the darling and divinity for the entire army of Virata! He, the supreme master of archery, had restrained himself in the cause of Dharma and obeyed respectfully his elder brother's wish... In the forest Bhima used to say repeatedly, 'Let us accept the exact words used in the game of dice to describe the wager. What does it mean? Simply that we should be in the forest for twelve years, right? Where in the terms of our agreement is any condition that, during the period of exile, we are not to kill Duryodhana, Dussasana, Sakuni and Karna or that we cannot wage war on them? Let us collect our forces to start the war — a part of Krishna's army, father-in-law Drupada's army and our own Indraprastha army before their loyalty to us vanishes. This is enough for us to go to war with them. Supported by these forces, I shall break Duryodhana's neck, kick him with my left foot, tear apart Dussasana's chest, throw away the flesh of Karna and Sakuni to the wild dogs. Then the Goddess of Dharma will be gratified. Or else this lineage of Pandavas will become extinct.' Ironical indeed that Bhima should have been regarded as a God, this Bhima who employs Dharma discourse to defend his crime of breaking a promise, this Bhima who rejects and ridicules the position of his elder brother in defiance of the Dharma of the Aryans. We got the news in Kampilya. The people worshipped Bhima as a God because in Ekachakra city he had killed the Rafeasa, Baka sura. Not just the people of that city but the entire people of Vetrakigriha.

But before Bhima was deified we had moved out of Ekachakra.

Because he had slain Jarasandha, all the kings released from his prison worshipped Bhima as a God. That was why Krishna chose him for the expedition to collect tributes from the kings to the east. The rulers of the east did not fight him but freely gave him cartloads of precious gifts. Well, the lucky ones attain fame even when they commit Adharma or violate Dharma. Bhima, you are my elder brother. I do not feel jealousy for you. But I am only sorry for these foolish folk who worship a person who had consistently violated Dharma!" Arjuna felt like turning again to the other side. Then he did not like the idea of sleeping in a running chariot. Though he knew that there was nothing to see but just hills and trees, he did not want to miss them, and wanted to be awake. But even if he didn't sleep, he wouldn't be seeing them lying down on the floor. Hence he got up and sat with a straight back. The question that continued to haunt him was, "How' can one born an Aryan be worthy if he spoke defiantly of his elders? Bhima never called Dhritarashtra his father, not even uncle. He always called him contemptuously, the blind fellow. He was no less contemptuous of Gandhari whom he called a blind woman. How can one blame Gandhari for loving her children,

and which mother doesn't love her children, whatever they may be? Can Bhima be said to have any idea of Dharma, when he cannot see the greatness of mother Gandhari, her commitment to Dharma in refusing to enjoy the benefits of her own eyesight and the glorious spectacle of this beautiful world because all that was denied to her blind husband? Isn't she a great devotee of her husband and a light of the Kuru dynasty? He ridicules anyone who calls her as mother Gandhari. And Panchali joins him with a soft smile, reinforcing the sense of contempt. These two violators of Dharma are bound to end up in hell after death. Not just hell, but the worst hell. All violators of Dharma are attracted to each other as naturally as birds of the same feather. Whatever may be her skill in maintaining the outward form of treating all the five equally, she is now running after Bhima. Well, she will be committing the sin of inwardly violating the vow made to mother, and thus violating Dharma. After all, Dharma is' greater than any individual, personal gratification or happiness. Dharma is higher than any fame. No doubt, the eldest brother whom Dharma assigns the status of a father when the father is dead, may have been foolish enough to gamble. Certainly not the right thing to do. If the enemy invites him to a game of dice, implying a challenge, how can a king who had attained great status among rulers by performing the rare Rajasuya sacrifice refuse? And once in the game, how fair is it to argue that one must only win, and never lose? And in the full assembly, this Bhima talked of burning the hands of Dharma who had successfully performed Rajasuya, because he had lost in gambling. He has no respect for elders, for the grandfathers who had fondled and loved us as kids, the acaryas who had gifted us with knowledge, and he dismissed them all in one sweep, in one moment of anger, as opportunists, lackeys slavishly supporting their sustainer! Has an Arya no other Dharma or duty excepting that of wreaking revenge? No doubt he earned the appreciation of some charioteers by taking revenge on Keechaka, by killing him and his brothers. But he broke the rules of our exile incognito and would have forced us to repeat the entire exile programme. If our breach had been known, could we have avoided this fate?

"It is wiser to possess contemplative far-sight than impulsive and momentary revengefulness. One must practise one's community Dharma. And our eldest brother, is an incarnation of this Dharma. This Arjuna is a faithful follower of that incarnation of Dharma. The person who defeated the Gandharvas and got released Duryodhana, was this Vijaya, but on that occasion Bhima revelled in the narrow satisfaction that the enemy had been slain, blissful in his pettiness! It is the duty of the king to supervise his cattle wealth, the cows that graze on green meadows, and in person keep account of them by branding them with the royal insignia, see how many are milching cows and how many not, how many male and how many female,

how many meaty and how many not. This is done once every year, and when the king is about this business, it is not unusual, in fact, understandable, that the queens and princesses, bored with idleness in the palace, joined the ruler. But was Bhima right in alleging that Duryodhana had brought out his ladies in regal splendour with him to the forest just to show them off against Panchali in tattered dress, to demonstrate his palace-fed and fattened arrogance? Maybe Bhima's allegation had an element of truth. And it would have been quite in character for Duryodhana. The primary stuff of his blood is not salt but jealousy. Granted. Yet it does not excuse Bhima's pettiness of mind. How did the hostility between Duryodhana and the Gandharvas start in the first place? Wasn't it over the question whether the Dvaita forest belonged to the Kurus or to the Gandharvas? It was during such a summer as this. Wasn't it a summer two years ago? Didn't we all go to the Dvaita forest because, being at the foot of the Himalayas, it would be cool in summer? It was in that forest the cows of Hastinavati used to graze. Duryodhana had gone with his entourage there. What is the exact northern boundary of Kuru land? Does Dvaita forest belong to Kurus? Naturally, the Gandharvas raised such issues as, 'If it doesn't belong to you, how can your cattle graze there? Why did you, Duryodhana, go there if it doesn't belong to you, Kurus, with your horses and all the royal bustle?' Duryodhana had challenged their position by counter-claiming the territory. Dvaitavana is a terrain of ups and downs. It marks the beginning of the Himalayas. And nobody had demarcated and determined with any distinguishable line any clear boundary. Maybe Duryodhana was right. Yes, now I can see brother's intelligence. Yes, he must have thought that if tomorrow we were to win the war and start ruling from Hastinavati, then we would be in a position of advantage. If we now defeat Gandharvas on this territory, then, later, we could call the Gandharva chief, Chitrasena, and drive sense into him, saying, 'Look, earlier you had staked your claim to Dvaitavana and lost it. Now you are warned to stay within your limits.'... As Arjuna was wondering how Bhima could ever have such subtle far-sight and statesmanship, he remembered that he, too, had not seen the point then. Arjuna thought, "Well, the idea did occur to Dharma and we may have doubts about its propriety. But that's another matter. We knew for certain that eldest brother is the wisest among us. He is, as he is named, a master of Dharma. None can claim to know and understand the Arya Dharma like him. He knows countless stories and legends regarding our great ancestors. What doesn't he know? So many sages and their origin, their fantastic births, so many kings and the details of the sacrificial rites and rituals performed by them, the whole procedure of rites and rituals the list of material needed for their performance, the relevant formulas to be employed in the rituals, how much money-gift to be given to Brahmanas, how to treat the guests. Our grandfather put

him on the throne at the young age of twenty-one or twenty-two, entrusting Dharma with administrative and judicial responsibilities. He used to discharge these duties according to custom and Dharma, and to the satisfaction of grandfather Bhishma. The common folk and the elders hailed his rule by saying that he had justified the name, Dharma, given to him. Even later in Indraprastha also he earned the same reputation. Didn't he in the disguise of the Brahmana, Kankabhatta, tender sound advice on matters of custom and tradition to the priests in the court of Virata? When we were doing the exile in forest, how many mendicants and sages of the forest visited him! And with what devotion he sat at their feet to listen fervently to their wisdom and knowledge! Wouldn't the God of Dharma not curse Bhima for calling so lightly such eldest brother of ours as foolish and stupid? He was born directly out of the semen of the Dharmadhikari of the Deva world. The knowledge of Dharma is part of his flesh and blood." At this point, Arjuna's devotion to his eldest brother manifested itself in an act of mentally bowing to Dharma. He continued his reflection, "Why should there be such difference in customs between us and our ancestors, the Devas? But, of course, I am not worried about what took place then with regard to the Duryodhana-Gandharva affair. I could never get a genuine description of how Duryodhana was captured. His soldiers who had fled rushed to me full of tears, and short of breath, and said, 'They carried him away. They carried our King Duryodhana, tying him up. And they carried the women, binding them with their own clothes, on their backs.' I got no further details about what had happened. Of course, I knew that he had gone there to inspect his cattle and claimed the pastures where they were grazing to be his territory. Immediately I went to Duryodhana's rescue and brought himback after release. He was so ashamed that he didn't stay a minute and went away without a word. How could I get the details of the fight between him and the Gandharvas? Even if I had asked for them, would Duryodhana have obliged me? They were mountain folk, those Gandharvas. They can climb up and down heights like monkeys. No matter how often they jump, they do not feel tired. Their bodies are hardened, while Duryodhana, this ruler from the plains, has been brought up in easy and comfortable conditions. And his soldiers had never experienced the mountains. Pretending to be defeated the Gandharvas might have lured them into the heights. When they had become exhausted by running up, the Gandharvas must have attacked them and captured them. Chasing from behind they might have taken some women from Duryodhana's party. Thus Duryodhana's party must have been provoked to follow them into the mountains. When the party became exhausted they might have been captured and bound with creepers. The method of fighting employed by these mountain folk poses insuperable dangers to the opponents. Not like us in the plains who conduct wars with

ceremony and rules, assembling the forces with chariots, elephants and horses, opposite to each other, announcing the battle with trumpets and inspiring battle hymns. No, they attack you from behind boulders or trees, merging with the environment by painting themselves with colours that blend into it. Even their dress and weapons are painted to become indistinguishable from their surroundings. Creating an illusion of absence they shoot arrows fast in unexpected directions and from unexpected places. They do not use means like the chariot, horse or elephant, like us in the plains. Up there in the mountains, they are unconquerable. And they do not easily come down and give battle. They seldom give us the chance to fight them face to face. In short, there is no single style of warfare. One must be versatile and versed in many styles of fighting. If I had not earlier learnt the mountain style of the hunting tribes from our ancestors in the Deva country, maybe I, too, would have had the same fate as Duryodhana's! Didn't I earlier chase the Gandharvas in the north of Manalur to their mountain home? But at that time I did not encounter any Gandharva men. But the Gandharvas are very brave. They dominate numerically the mountain regions. They were weeping before Dharma, those defeated soldiers of Duryodhana. And how swiftly eldest brother understood the Dharma. He told Bhima who was standing by, 'You heard it, Bhima. Go forthwith, collect those and other dispirited soldiers after enthusing them and then attack Chitrasena to rescue our brother and his women.' Bhima laughed loudly at this. What contempt was concentrated in That laughter! And his voice that , rapped Dharma on his face, said, 'Do you know how to bite if a finger is put in your mouth?' He continued, Is it possible for you who have become emaciated in the hardships of the forest exile such as severe cold, extreme heat and starvation, to kill Duryodhana? The Goddess of Dharma herself seems to have used those Gandharvas to get him captured. And now do you want us to get him released? You have surrendered your wits to the hand that rolls the dice, haven't you?'

Dharma advised, 'Bhima, do not speak like this. We may quarrel among ourselves, but we are brothers. When outsiders attack any one of us, we should all rally round and unite against the outsiders as brothers.'

Bhima, 'Do you think I have not heard this parrot talk before? If any bearded mendicants are around, narrate to them your tall stories and holy legends. Go and tell them.' I ask you, are these the words to be uttered in the presence of Duryodhana's soldiers? Wouldn't they later report to their master that the Pandavas had no unity and that they do not respect their own elder brother, who had ascended the throne? Haven't they really reported this to Duryodhana?

"Dharma had turned to me and said, 'Arjuna, this Bhima has no

feeling for the nuances of Dharma. Would Dharma tolerate if we let our Aryan women, that, too, our Kuru women be carried away by non-Aryans because of internal enmity? Would our elders approve of us?'

"One must admire Dharma's wisdom and intelligence! My blood began to boil in no time. Suppose these outsiders who had made off with our women had done some violence to them by now... But then my own experience of Gandharvas re-assured me. As the Gandharvas allow by custom free movement between their men and women, their men do not have any special hunger for other women, and show restraint in treating them. Their men work hard to attract their women, employing flowers, colours, flute, songs and dance! Suppose, meanwhile, their men had taken our Kuru women to an unknown place, unbound them, decorated themselves with flowers, and decked the women also with flowers, painting themselves, danced round them singing melodiously and attracted our women, softening their hearts and minds, with the Gandharva women also joining in the dance and song. I realised the urgency of the situation and decided to hurry to the spot. It is our duty to protect the purity of the Aryan, Kuru women, in order to satisfy the spirit of our ancestors. Otherwise this Arjuna of Kuru lineage will find himself consigned to the worst of hells.

"I had almost forgotten that Panchali was there until she intervened, saying, 'Bhima, then, it follows from your brother's - argument that our lineage's prestige and honour were not tarnished when brothers lasciviously invited a daughter-in-law of their own lineage in an open assembly. Well, never mind that now. Let not the humiliation I suffered be inflicted on their wives. You hurry now to get those in-laws of mine released. Bhima, do not persist in your desire to kill Duryodhana and Dussasana yourself. Leave that job to the Gandharvas, and return with the women.'

"Then the eldest brother who seldom raised his voice said with feeling, 'Arjuna, a woman's understanding cannot rise above this level. You proceed to get them all released, and bring them back.'

"Well, I was more than a match for these Gandharvas living at a height lower than that of those with whom I had spent four years in the Himalayas earlier! It was not for nothing that the king of the Deva people gave me the title of Vijaya or the Victorious One! Who can shoot arrows better from a bow taller than a man? Who else has the sharpness of hearing that can detect the slightest rustle behind boulders, trees and bushes? Perhaps poor Chitrasena did not even dream that a super-warrior like Arjuna was going to tackle them! How could those forest Gandharvas know that arrows can have tips sharper than the edges of axes? Let alone among the savage

mountain people, even among the Aryans, whose arrows but mine have the sharpness to slice any tree? What did Chitrasena say finally, this Chitrasena who was dancing with joy round the bound Duryodhana and his party? He asked me, 'The middle one among the Pandava brothers, why are you indulging in the folly of getting your enemy released?'

"I gave a reply worthy of an Aryan, saying, What we do between ourselves is purely our business. When others poke their nose into our internal affairs, then Duryodhana becomes automatically my brother.' That silenced him. By the time I could take back Duryodhana and Dussasana, Bhima had already lined up with the daughters-in-law of the Kuru family. Did he do this to deprive me of the credit and fame of doing what is right?.Maybe he was simply carrying out the orders of Panchali! Well, he always is swayed by a woman's words. More recently he has begun to regard his wife's words as far more valuable than those of his own elder brother. How can such a person acquire Dharma, and attain divinity?"

Arjuna felt himself superior. He was proud that he had never spoken words against his elders. Never shown them disrespect. Not just to his brother Dharma, not just to Dronacharya, but to his grandfather, Kripacharya, father Dhritarashtra, mother Gandhari, because how can anyone achieve anything in the world without the blessings of the elders? Then he lifted his head. The moon had risen to the point right on top of the chariot. A stray star or two twinkled here and there in the dull, ashen sky. His eyes suddenly fastened on the sky and the stars. His mind pierced through the ashen cover of the sky and penetrated to the eternal point of a star. It was a brightness that would never die. Every star, settled in an eternal position, illuminated and gave light to the inhabitants of the three universes. He sat, his head lifted towards the sky and his eyes staring at it. The chariot was tossing and wobbling.

After quite some time, Arjuna came down from his skyward attention to the earth below! The earth looked empty and barren. All of a sudden his mind was filled with boredom and disgust. He yawned. But it was a yawn of ennui, not a yawn of sleep. He stared hard at Tushta's back. He could see that Tushta wasn't asleep. He called him, "Tushta." Immediately Tushta responded by turning his head behind. Arjuna asked, "Is there any liquor available?" There was no immediate reply. After a while he answered, "Not the kind fit for persons like you. It is made of rice only. It has become very sour. I am not sure that even that has been left by them." Arjuna said, "Never mind. Give me a little." Getting down from the running chariot he went up and got a jarful of the drink from another chariot, handed the jar over to Arjuna, and then resumed his seat, holding the reins again, all the five reins. Arjuna did not relish the over-

soured drink. But his boredom along this barren route was so great that even this substandard stuff appeared welcome. He began to swill it slowly, almost reluctantly, as he belched occasionally sour belches. Tushta broke the silence and asked, "Maharaja, how did you get the title of Vijaya, the victorious?"

Arjuna was slow in reacting, as he grunted, "Title, what title?" Then he quickly emptied the jar. The sour had diminished. He covered the jar, wiped his lips, and, remembering Tushta's question, asked, "Did you refer to some title?"

Tushta, "Well, the drink is meant for the likes of us. If you do not remember about the title, you can tell me tomorrow."

Arjuna, "Stupid, you have no idea what sorts of drinks I have taken in all sorts of lands. What do you know about it? Even the very God of Soma has not to this day created any intoxicating drink that can upset either the intelligence or the memory of this Arjuna." Then he sat stiff, and added, "Do you know that I spent twelve years in the forest?"

Tushta, "Yes, I know all about that. You performed the Rajasuya rite, then gambled, and then went to the forest."

Arjuna, "We had already spent six or seven years in the forest. You know my eldest brother, Dharma. He is very wise and far-sighted. After a good deal of thinking, he said to me, 'Arjuna, in any future war, our victory will depend only on your mastery and skill in archery. Even now, there is no warrior matching your mastery over archery. Yet it is advisable to enrich your skill with additional equipment. You must pick up different styles and techniques of warfare from different groups. First go to the country of the Devas and imbibe their skill and art in archery."

Tushta, impressed, "Maharaja, did you visit that wonderful land of the Devas after flying in the sky and going beyond the sun and the moon? What great penance gave you the power to accomplish this feat? How many years of penance did you have to perform to attain it?" Almost instinctively, his palms joined into a prayer.

Arjuna, "No, not that land of Devas, the Gods. You know about the Himalayas, the mountains which give birth to the sacred rivers of the Ganga and Yamuna, and from where they flow down to the plains? If you climb these mountains higher, you come across a tribe. They are known as the Deva tribe. They are very brave warriors. We, the Pandava brothers, were all born and brought up in the green meadowland in the lower regions of the Himalayas.

Do you know about it? It was then that we became acquainted with those Deva people. They call their country, the Deva land. Their land

is called Deva land just as we call the land of the Nagas, the Naga land, and the land of the Gandharvas, the Gandharva land. What a wonderful country it is! As you climb, on and on, to reach it, every part of your body will be aching acutely — your thighs, kneecap, the feet. The muscles will get knotted through pain. The sun gives no heat in that region, and heat has no room there. Liquor never sours there. And cooked food does not rot even if kept for long time. It freezes and shrinks. Water turns into slabs of ice. We are free from the cruelty of the summer sun there. It is such a land. When we were ruling in Indraprastha, we used to supply them with grain on the back of donkeys. Though it is from that land that all the plains below get their water, there is no cultivation of land there. Only in summer, they manage some cultivation in patches along the slopes. Otherwise their food comes from hunted animals and wild roots and fruits. And what handsome people, and how healthy! They are so strong, and they do not lose their strength through sweating as we do here. Even if you climb up and down four peaks, you don't get exhausted. Strength is so well conserved..."

Tushta had changed his position to face Arjuna, and nodded at the narrative with his whole body. Arjuna could see clearly his appreciative nod. It encouraged him to raise his voice and continue, "Well, they know us. Moreover our father Pandu got us five brothers born through the NNiyoga arrangement. It was the Deva people who performed the Niyoga on our mothers. We had the advantage of the attachment and affection arising out of this relationship, too. When I went there, shivering in the cold covering myself with a garment made of sheep-skin, protecting my head and body by donning a woollen blanket, here below the summer sun was burning mercilessly. Normally they do not entertain the entry of outsiders. If a stranger were to enter their land unintroduced, then he is sure to be riddled with arrows flying from behind boulders or trees."

Tushta, "How did you manage then?"

Arjuna, "There is no passage into that country from any side. There are a few mountain passes through which alone one can go there. These points are well guarded by them. I knew all this.

Therefore, I first shouted most loudly who I was, even as I climbed the mountain. Later on the watchmen posted there recognised me and accompanied me."

Tushta, "Did they teach you any archery?"

Tushta, "Oh, you know they are organised into specialised groups or clans. Every clan has its own distinctive weaponry and warfare style. The chiefs of the various clans themselves taught me their art of warfare. Vayu, Agni, Vasu, Varuna, Marut, Sadhya, Nir-riti,

Svayam, and others, so many of them, instructed me. Their bows are not as large as ours on the plains here. In any case, none of them possessed a bow as large as mine. Yet we lack their skill and expertise in aiming and quickness of action. Using one bow, they can simultaneously shoot several arrows at several targets. The arrow always goes straight. But you may not believe it but they have the skill to make the arrow go zig zag and destroy the target. Isn't it mountainous land? If they shoot such arrows from behind huge boulders, it will surely hit the hiding enemy. These are special arrows, with a special shape and their weight distributed in a special way along its length. I learnt all that. Also some new techniques. They taught me everything, withholding nothing. I spent four years with them and learnt new skills like a young novice, and mastered new methods. They even paid me a handsome compliment by saying that I had mastered their own skills even better than they! Tushta, if the war were to break now, I shall show the world what a great master of archery this Vijaya is!"

Tushta asked eagerly, "Can you demonstrate your skill by shooting one arrow?"

Arjuna looked out of the chariot. He picked up one of his bows, positioned it, took out from his arsenal a peculiarly shaped arrow, and shot it in the left direction. Then he told Tushta, "Stop the chariot. See in front of you that wide boulder? You can spot a tree behind it. Do you see it?"

Tushta had to focus his eyes hard to see, and he said, "Yes, yes."

Arjuna, "Go now and see my arrow stuck into the lower part of its trunk. Bring it back."

It Was dim moonlight. The running chariot. In the distance the boulder and behind it, the tree. Tushta shouted to the charioteers ahead to stop their vehicles. Those behind stopped of their own accord. Getting off the chariot, Tushta, accompanied by two others, went to the invisible back of the boulder. They found the arrow passing by the right of the tree, and stuck in its bole. The discovery created in Tushta first a sense of wonder, then fear and finally a sense of devotion. He removed the arrow from the branch and, as he returned it to him, his hands trembled with fear and devotion. The row of chariots started to move. Arjuna said, "I not only learnt the skill. But I practised with this large bow. By my own experimenting I designed arrows matching this kind of bow. I had to think of new aiming power and quickness of movement thrice that of the original arrows. Now who can stand against such arrows? One day, the king of the Devas, Indra, sent for me and said, "Son, in our western region, there is a unique group of people. You know we engage in commerce with the people in the plains below, by exchanging our woollen

blankets for their food-grains, copper, ghee and so on. We transact this in summer, and these people loot us on our route. It seems that their livelihood depends on such plundering. But, they, too, make blankets like us and sell them to the people in the plains. Of course, the blankets we produce are superior to theirs in quality. You see, our goats and sheep are of a superior breed. The people in the plains are crazy about our blankets and pay whatever amount of provisions we ask for them. That plundering group is called the Nivatakavacas. If you can subdue them, that shall be your fee for the skills we have taught you.' Earlier the Devas must have made several attempts to tackle this group, but with no success. I determined to achieve what they had failed to achieve."

Tushta, "How did you accomplish it, Lord Arjuna?" Facing Arjuna, he had joined his palms in a gesture of prayer.

Arjuna, "A little before that winter, I surveyed the territory of those people with the help of some Deva warriors. I studied the physical setting and features of their village and the paths into and out of their habitation. They live in a highly inaccessible terrain. Then I asked the Devas to go along that route with donkeys and goats, carrying the blankets on their back. Then these people rushed at the Deva party to plunder them. As pre-planned, we went to their place, burnt their villages and houses. Then we waited for them in the narrow pass through which they had to go to their villages. From a higher position a small posse of Devas began to shoot at the party returning with the loot. From below we also attacked them. Thus we succeeded in wiping out every one of the looting party. To tell you the truth, I am not really proud of this operation, and it needed no real heroism. They were really not all that invincible. The Devas, through repeated defeat, had developed a fear complex about them. Of course, it is understandable that their strength and courage, so evident in the icy heights, seemed to let them down as they descended to the plains. But Indra's status as their king was then at stake as any failure to subdue the plundering group would have led to his dethronement. This was the Deva tradition. I had helped Indra in retaining his throne. He seated me ceremonially on his own throne and honoured me publicly by conferring on me the title of Vijaya."

Tushta remained silent with an attitude of devotion towards Arjuna. He was hoping that Arjuna would speak of some other adventures and exploits. But he didn't know how to ask him for it. Then he once again turned towards his horses. But Arjuna's thoughts did not yet leave the Deva country. "Though I had spent four years with them, I was interested primarily in warring skills, and, during the brief interludes between the lessons in warfare, I had tried to learn their dances. The name Arjuna was synonymous with single-

minded concentration. They, too, were people capable of concentration. Though their men and women were free to move and behave without external restraint, they treated me as an outsider. Maybe they looked down on me because I was there as a novice learning their art of archery. But once I had accomplished what their Indra and the army chief had failed to do and their own king had made me his equal by seating me on his throne and giving me the title of Vijaya, they had accepted me as one of their own community. And Vijaya is supposed to be one of the titles of Indra himself, and none among them was entitled to it. What a fantastic victory celebration they had organised! And what blissful liquor was flowing on the occasion! And round me danced most beautiful women, who were normally the preserve of their chiefs. And their names — Ghritachi, Menake, Rambhe, Purvacitti,Svayamprabha, Urvashi, Mishrakeshi, Dandagauri, Varauthini, Gopali, Sahajanya, Kumbhayoni, Prajagada, Chitrasene, Chitralekhe, Saha, and Madhuraswara — all entertainers under Indra's direct and personal control. If any chief of a clan performed some worthy service, he was rewarded with the company of one of them for a day or a month as willed by Indra. Devas had very fair skin, and these were the pick of their women earmarked for Indra. They were free from routine chores such as rearing goats, weaving blankets, carrying the tents when journeying down in winter, and rearing of children. Their only duties consisted in dancing, drinking and sexual pleasures. They were highly skilled courtesans. The night I was given the title was a clear night, one of those nights following after winter. In the clear sky, the moon floated soft and bright. But those snow peaks shining in the moonlight looked more attractive than the moon itself. Yet it was when the moon, who kindled dreams and sanctified the surroundings, smeared ice with the heavenly Soma liquor, that Chitrasena came to me and said, 'Vijaya, another reward awaits you, please follow me.' I followed him. Opposite to the palace of Indra stood a high mansion, built of stone. When I entered it, I found Urvashi. Chitrasena explained, 'Didn't you this afternoon cast your desiring eye on her? Well, Indra has given her to you. You can have her as long as you want. You can even take her with you to your country.' Then he closed the door leaving us two alone. What pride and coquetry were there in her ravishing face! Even in that dim light, her flesh was white and bright as snow. There was a fire to keep us warm, a white woollen blanket and a feather soft mattress.

Urvashi, 'Vijaya, hasn't it been four and half years now since you first set foot on our soil? You lived as if we have here nothing but bow and arrow. Do you think a life devoted only to them is worth living?'

"Hers was the style that could ridicule and embarrass your inner strength and confidence. She continued, 'Don't you see what I mean?

You did not join us for learning dancing. You preferred to learn it haphazardly from men. You played instruments. Never joined in group drinking. Never sang in our company. Never played instruments with us. Do you think that the sole end of life is to make and listen to the sound of shooting arrows?'

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"What did I feel then in reaction to this query? Fear? Was I a male inexperienced with women? I had spent the previous ten years in exile and abstained from sex. Now I was forty-eight. Ten years of starvation. And there by my side was a fair-complexioned, highly attractive young woman, adept in the art of sexual pleasure. How old was she? A little less than thirty. When she was so close to me, bantering and exciting in her talk, I was feeling uptight. It was an uptightness whose cause I was unable to locate.

Urvashi spoke, 'Vijaya, which woman will not run after a person like you who is capable of such fierce single-minded concentration! And especially courtesans like us can go mad over you. And what enchanting features your face and body possess! I will now confess that I was inwardly languishing for your body, feeling empty in your absence. But we belong to Indra's court officially. We cannot choose our own companions and bed-mates. I am fortunate that today Indra himself has been pleased to grant me your company. Try this one night. If you find me worthy of you, ask Indra to give me away to you for good, I shall follow you to your land. It seems you folk on earth are unusually fond of children. I shall bear you as many children as you desire.'

"These were words sweet to hear. How can any man's maleness not be roused to a frenzy in the company of a woman who can speak such seductive words? Was she really then in love with me or was she merely practising her courtesan's art and charm? Even if it was art, her words were genuinely intoxicating.

"She continued, 'Handsome one, first drink this liquid. After that you will be ready to enter the real bliss of this Deva land.'

"She was so erotically close. She looked like a woman carefully, sculpted out of the moon radiant in the clear sky. It seems the most beautiful and skillfull among the courtesans is conferred the status and title of Urvashi in the Deva country. And Indra had sent me such a woman. And that marvellous drink she offered! What plant has it been extracted from? Does it mean that our drink in Indraprastha is not made out of pure soma juice? Even in the Deva land itself, in all my four year's stay, I had not tasted a drink like this, which did not

have a trace of sourness and yet stimulated so strongly. Was this a special drink earmarked for Indra and his closest coterie? It makes you feel as if the moon is coming down to you. It makes you warm and gently sweat. And there was her embrace which would warm my body to an even greater excitement. She asked me, ‘Vijaya, why are you shrinking within yourself? As if you are sitting for penance. Unless both of us are excited, how can there be real pleasure?’

"In the comforting warmth of the afternoon, Indra held his court. Present in the court were the chiefs of all the thirty-three clans into which the Deva population was divided. There were so many others as well. There was dancing, vocal singing and playing of instruments by the courtesans. In dance, Urvashi stood out as the most outstanding artist. Every gesture of her body brought forth a specific feature of her loveliness. I was watching her entranced, it is true. Finally there was an address by Indra. He said, ‘Chiefs of clans, remember that this great warrior who successfully vanquished our greatest enemies, the Nivatakavacas, is not merely a disciple who has come to learn from us. He is, in fact, a son of mine, that is, a son of Indra. He was born to my predecessor Indra. You can see that his features and size recall my predecessor in the office of Indra. Therefore, as an indication of my paternal love for him I sniff his head, seat him on my throne, and then grant him the title, Vijaya.’ The approval of the assembly, the words, ‘So be it’, echoed and re-echoed in the snow-white mountains.

Urvashi said, "Vijaya, I have successfully excited desire even in those sitting in deep penance, and I have managed to help blossom sexual urge in those stricken with old age. You can’t take me in by this pretence of being disinterested in me. It just won’t do.’

"As soon as I had reached the Deva land, Indra had accepted me as a son, when he approved of my calling him a father. But that afternoon he proclaimed it formally by sniffing my head. Before I had set out for the Deva country, Dharma had suggested, ‘Arjuna, after you reach the Deva land, see our Niyoga parents, who had caused our birth, with your own eyes, bow to them and receive their blessings. The Dharmadhikari who caused my birth is known as Yama. The one responsible for Bhima’s birth is called Maruta. The one who caused your own birth is called Indra. The twin Deva doctors who caused the birth of Nakula and Sahadeva are known as Ashwinis. All of them have the status of being your fathers. When you meet them, mention to each one of them specifically the son whom they have created. But don’t forget to prostrate at their feet.’

"The moon had comedown, pervading the mind, and climbed up again. It was a pleasant, gentle sweat. It was a silence accentuated by the whirring of the insects. She said, ‘Vijaya, why is it that you have

such contempt for me? Why do I repel you? I have not come here simply because I am logically bound to obey his commands. Doesn't your body feel the flames that are consuming my flesh? When I am in the midst of flames that can melt all icy peaks, why are you sitting there immobile, frozen like an icy peak?'

She continued, 'Arjuna, you may be a great archer. True. But you are also a eunuch. If you had declared at the start that you are impotent, I wouldn't have bothered to desire your body. Then I would have been spared all this pang of unfulfillment. By some accident you certainly have the outward form of a male. Here, take this for hiding from your true nature…' She slapped me hard on the left cheek which became swollen with pain. The moon disappeared behind a cloud then. This was the worst humiliation this Arjuna had ever suffered. Urvashi was furious as she screamed, 'You know that everybody in the Deva land is anxious even to have the contact of my feet. When I myself, inflamed by desire, embraced you, you have insulted me by not reacting even slightly. I shall report the matter to Indra and have you punished.' As she stood up, I wanted to say but could not, the words choked in my throat. 'I shall touch your feet.' She rushed out with such speed! For a man, is there a worse humiliation than being accused of impotence, that too, by a woman? These thoughts were floating in my mind. But why did my body stiffen and refuse to re-act? Had Arjuna's sexual potency exhausted ? No, it didn't anger me when she slapped my cheek. But why did I cry after she left? It would have been more natural if the body had danced with madness and the mind controlled it. But in this case, the mind itself assumed the role of the body, behaved accordingly and pushed the body towards a humiliating position. By the time I could find solace to this humiliation, Urvashi had brought Indra himself to that place. What power these courtesans of Indra's court wield!

Indra said, 'Arjuna, you are a great warrior with the title of Vijaya. If perchance you are impotent, surrender yourself totally and with complete attention to our Urvashi. She is a doctor who can cure your impotence and re-kindle your sexual urge to a boiling point. If you refuse to surrender that way, it would amount to insulting her. No matter how high your status, in our Deva land none has a right to jilt and humiliate a woman who desires him. Moreover this woman is a court dancer. Insult to her is insult to the court, and that means, insult to me. Because I saw you gazing at her with desirous eyes, I sent her to you.'

"What kind of an answer could I offer Indra? My body, despite her embrace and provocative prodding, became stiff like a piece of wood, and the awareness of this woodenness made the body more wooden! How puzzling the body can behave! Or perhaps the sexual potency of my life was at an end? When I myself was not clear about the

situation, what answer and explanation could I offer him?

I said, ‘Father, please punish me for whatever error I may have committed, regardless of the severity of punishment. Bless me so that no male successor of mine can attract the accusation of being a eunuch. Let them not be the object of such degrading and cruel condemnation. I was the one who, unable to suffer celibacy even for a limited period, wandered all over the land in search of women. The reason why I didn’t take her, suddenly it flashed, is because of a question of Dharma involved.’

Indra, ‘Speak up. Explain.’

‘You are the father who brought about my birth. You declared this relationship between us yourself, by sniffing my head, in the open court. She is an object of your enjoyment. Among others who have a right to enjoy her body are the clan chiefs who happen to be my brothers’ fathers. That means, they, too are my fathers. Well, if all this true, wouldn’t Urvashi have the status of a mother to me?’

Urvashi laughed loudly, saying, ‘Indra, aren’t you at least ten years younger than him? How could you have produced him? It’s impossible!’

But Indra did not laugh. He spoke calmly, The Indra who produced you was an earlier Indra, one immediately before me. And so many years have lapsed since his death! That Indra had not even seen her face.’

‘Then why did you sniff my head and call me your son?’

‘By virtue of my position and office,’ Indra added.

‘Well, there you are. By virtue of the same position, she has the status of a mother to me.’

"It is difficult to say whether Indra would have accepted my argument. There would have been no difficulty for him in accepting my position. If he had not accepted it, there would have been no loss. But would Urvashi give up her stand? Just as the label of a eunuch was like a pair of scissors to cut the very roots of my life, wouldn’t she consider sending me away without giving me sexual gratification as a sharp axe ready to hack at her status and reputation as the holder of the Urvashi position? She demanded, 'Indra, call your Dharmadhikari. Send for your other clan chiefs. The issue of Dharma he has raised must be resolved. Now. Forthwith’. She issued an order. What great authority she wielded!

"This was not the same Dharmadhikari who had produced my eldest brother. He was approximately of my age. It seemed that the Maruta who had caused Bhima’s birth was lying sick with asthama

for sixyears. I went to him, bowed to him, and introduced myself. He enquired with such warmth and affection about the welfare of mother and Bhima! He embraced me and fondled my head. His thick hands exuded love. If our real fathers had been alive, who knows what intense affection they might have showered on us. Or maybe this demonstrative style is peculiar to Bhima's father. The Ashwini brothers were also no longer the old persons who had fathered Nakula and Sahadeva.

How strange were the words of Dharmadhikari, delivered in the court of Indra in the evening, after listening to all the parties! They were, 'Arjuna, we do not recognise the sort of relationship you mention. You have said that a person without children can resort to Niyoga to perpetuate a lineage. We do not have that custom. You know it yourself that we practise community marriage, all men and women of a clan are collectively married to each other. If one woman has no children, we simply regarded her as one lacking a reproductive womb. That's all. Neither she nor others grieve at the fact. Depending on age, children call others mothers and fathers. As soon as she matures sexually, a girl is sent away as a wife of another clan. That is how we avoid the incest problem by practising inter-clan marriages. In short, ours is a different world fromyours. How dare you import your custom and laws to humiliate our Urvashi?'

I challenged, 'Am I not obliged to practise the Dharma of my world?'

Dharmadhikari, 'You can do that in your world, certainly. If you try to sow the seeds of your Dharma in our world, it would amount to Adharma, violation of our Dharma. Remember, we are the ones who practise your original Dharma. Not you.'

Urvashi gave the final verdict, 'Arjuna, with us our Dharmadhikari has the last word in matters of Dharma. There is no appeal against him, and no excuse thereafter will be entertained. Accept our assessment that you are a eunuch. If you try to besmirch my reputation, I shall not remain quiet. Or else follow me now to my bed-room and disprove my accusation,' She just vanished. I detected blood springing in her cheeks..."

The chariots seemed to have slowed down. Subhadra turned to the other side, and made some noise as she did so. Arjuna felt a tightness in his stomach. As the chariot jolted, he felt a similar jolting in his stomach. He was now not sure whether Urvashi had merely accused him or laid him under a curse. After his return from the Deva land he had to undergo the enforced celibacy of the exile in the forest. He said to himself, "Though Panchali spoke sympathetically because of the absence of five years, I knew that there was no longer any genuine love between us. Why did I take on the role of a eunuch in

Virata's city and teach music and dancing to women? Such Gandharva arts are automatically learnt by men and women in Gandharva country. Anybody can teach anybody, irrespective of sex. But in our Aryavarta it must be a eunuch who can instruct women. Why? In countries like Madra, Gandharva and Bahlika, this practice is not followed. How obsessed we have become with the idea of protecting the virginity and chastity of women! While in incognito, couldn't I have taken up some other occupation? They tell me I behaved perfectly like a eunuch, in my speech, gestures, posture and behaviour, and none suspected I was acting. Panchali herself said so. Was that just artistry? Before appointing me as a teacher of dancing for women in the palace, King Virata tested me by leaving in my company beautiful women. I passed that test without any difficulty. Then for one whole year, morning and evening I was in tantalising proximity to luscious young girls. I had to touch their lovely bodies to teach them correct postures and gestures. Though my mind was excited as I held their hands, arms and waist as a teacher, my body remained unruffled.

Soon after the exile in incognito, when Subhadra came to me, even then the body didn't seem to respond. Several days after my arrival in Upaplavya, she was constrained to say, 'Now you are really in the grip of old age. May be you have aged fast in the forest exile.' But has this Arjuna really grown old? Has old age come to me, to me who can hold a large bow and practise archery non-stop without tiring?. By fifty or fifty-one? Or else why didn't I accept the challenge of Urvashi that I should follow her to the bed-room? Was I scared of facing defeat? Indra himself had assured me that she had the ability and skill, provided I surrendered to her totally, to cure me of my impotence and re-activise my sexual prowess. Why didn't I accept his advice? My stomach became tight. A tightness that was beyond endurance. Every bit of my body ached. My eyes became completely filled with Urvashi's beauty.." Tushta sitting opposite to him was dozing off. Subhadra sleeping near his feet was breathing with a hissing sound. The hills in the distance appeared to expand and contract their bellies as if they had breathing sickness." Only Marutha who was Bhima's Niyoga father was alive. Had the others been alive, they would have shown me the same affection and love. What did that Dharmadhikari say? My mind was all knotted. I can't recollect everything. Nothing about relationship. Nothing about Niyoga. It seems that Krishna Dvaipayana, the great sage, donated his semen to our two grandmothers, with only one single selfless idea — to help the childless women to realise their motherhood. But what were the inner urges that prompted our Niyoga fathers to produce us? The pain in my stomach intensified..."Arjuna changed his position to relieve the tension in the belly, leaned his legs against the chariot's threshold. He felt somewhat relaxed. He thought it would be nice if

someone could fan him. Subhadra herself was sleeping. But even if she were awake, she wouldn't have had the sensitivity to guess his need without his mentioning it. Well, Panchali was very different. Though she had no genuine love for him, Panchali had carried out her duties towards him as his wife with exemplary devotion and understanding. Who could match her? As he was wondering whether there was any woman in the world who could match her in understanding a man's needs and serving him with anticipation, when she was on wifely duties, his mind ran to Indraprastha. He remembered that, after he took Subhadra, he hadn't yet got his turn with Panchali. He mused, "It is now Dharma's turn. For one year. Then Bhima's. Another year. Then she will be mine, all mine, for one full year. Well, this time I just shall have to placate her, see that her anger with me is wiped out, and recover her as my companion as in the good, old times..."Suddenly he remembered what Duryodhana was propagating. What was it he was propagating ? The Pandavas were merely children of Kunti, and didn't belong strictly to the Kuru lineage. Hence they were not eligible to share the kingdom with the Kauravas. The chariots began to swerve sharply. Then he remembered his grandfather, Bhishma. Arjuna recalled, "He had praised me, calling me a beautiful child, and held me tight against his thighs. This was when we had arrived in Hastinavati from the mountain slopes after father's death. I remember it was a pebble-strewn road we had traversed. My memory began to present pictures of the past, one after another..."Arjuna found it difficult now to sit leaning against the chariot's wall. He suddenly sat up. The nausea inside the belly made him feel like retching. Even before he could thrust his face out of the chariot to vomit, the bile began to gush out of his mouth. It came out uncontrolled. Tushta who was dozing woke up at the sound, crossed Subhadra, and began to knead Arjuna's shoulders gently. He said to his master, "That was a bad drink. I had warned you that this isn't for people like you, great King." But the sense of these words never reached Arjuna's consciousness. He was too full of memories — memories of the grandfather, and a question was forming in his mind, an imperfectly formulated question, a question to be addressed to Krishna.

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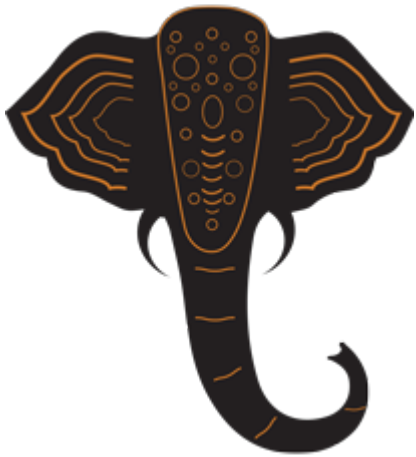
PART SIX



Chapter

25

THE sea-breeze invariably blew during the evening saunters. Though the breeze did not help one escape totally from the stickiness of the sultry weather, it did help to dry away the sweat. The roar of the waves was reaching a crescendo. No wonder that in Dwaraka, people associated breeze with the waves in their mind. It was not necessary to stand or sit on the sands of the seashore to sea the waves. Even while one slept in one's home, and closed one's eyes, one saw the dancing waves and heard their rhythmic roar. Wave, wind, heat and sweat constituted an inter-connected unity, one arising out of the other. If one took the day's journey to the Raivata mountain on a horse, and climbed it, one could see in the far distance, the dull water, cool wind, and one's body sweatless. Yet for persons like Yuyudhana, the sands which the waves tried to conquer in vain, had an irresistible attraction. Even in summer, he would hurry to the sands, before sundown, and squat on it. The humid, heavy air, the sultriness, the burning sun — these were the setting to his red face, sun-tanned back, arms and chest. If anyone asked him. about his sun-burnt skin, he would say, in good humour, "Look, I am already fifty. My grandson is completing his fourteen years. Tanned, or dark, who cares and who worries?" Who can ask him such a question taking such liberty? Of course, non? but his close crony, Krishna. Though they were of equal age, in terms of relationship, he was Krishna's uncle. It seemed Yuyudhana's great grandfather and Krishna's great grand father were one and the same person. Since they were of the same age, were such close friends and had done so much together, grew together, neither worried about the actual blood relationship. He would tell Krishna, "Krishna, the very day my grandson was born, that is, my thirty-sixth year, I started regarding myself as a grandpa. But you, even though you had a grandson married, refuse to regard yourself as an old man. Your skin has darkened, and so has mine. But, like you, I don't apply milk cream and sandalwood to improve my complexion. Do I?"

The clouds which came floating in the afternoon, massed up, creating the hope of rain, were scattered by the evening winds.

People would expect the rain, and come out to wet their sweat-

soaked bodies in the first rain of the season, lifting their eager faces towards the sky. As usual, the evening scattered the clouds as well as their hopes. But Yuyudhana never blamed the wind. He would gain mental peace as he sat on the sand, exposing his chest to the wind. This exercise relaxed his mental and physical tensions. His mind would come to rest in the waters beyond the blue and green waves. This particular evening, too, he sat on the expanse of the sand. Beyond the fishing-boats, the red sun was sinking, hurting the eyes with his red rays. He asked himself, "Why haven't the first rains fallen this year so far?" This really worried him. His fear and worry were not because delayed rains would mean excessive sultriness, or water shortage for men and animals, or because it would upset the agricultural activities, leading eventually to famine. His instinct told him that there was going to be a fierce war that year in Aryavarta. His friend Krishna had also said that there would be a war, whether Duryodhana gave back to the Pandavas their kingdom or not, after the end of their exile. Whether the Pandavas gained what they wanted or not, this was not a war confined to the affairs of the Kurus only. It was but natural that the Pandavas should win the support of the Panchalas in the war, being related through marriage. It was not unlikely that the Panchalas were preparing for this event for the last twelve years. For his part, Duryodhana was collecting the support of all the rulers of the Aryan world and massing his armed forces. Not to be left behind him, the Pandavas, too, were going round begging for support in the war: Was that why Krishna was camping with the Pandavas in Upaplavya? — Yuyudhana asked himself. It was common knowledge that he himself was a supporter of the Pandavas. After all, he was an intimate friend of Krishna. He was also a good friend of Arjuna. Hadn't he helped the Pandavas during the Rajasuya rite? Duryodhana invited Dharma who was not a good player, to play dice by kindling his gambling desire. Krishna had said, the question was not whether one knew the game or not, because it was illegitimate to earn by gambling. Krishna was right, he felt. Duryodhana not only won in the game, but he refused to return to the Pandavas their territory as mutually agreed. Now he had come to ask for Yadava support in the coming war. Suddenly a wave, a huge one, rushed to where he was sitting, wetting his legs and thighs, soaking the sands. It cut his flesh as it returned to the sea in a white froth. How warm did the waters of the sea feel in the summer evening! Duryodhana who arrived in Dwaraka was a guest of Balarama. Duryodhana had said to Balarama, "My beloved teacher, you don't need to treat me with formal hospitality as a wearer of a crown. Please do not bother to house me in an official guest hall." Yuyudhana recalled, "Yes, naturally, wouldn't Duryodhana get treated as a personal guest of Balarama? Ignoring the fact that the Pandavas were related to his own sister, opposing Krishna, and disregarding my own advice, would Balarama give Duryodhana

whatever he asked from him? Knowing that Krishna is away, with the Pandavas in Upaplavya, Duryodhana has come here to split the Yadavas, creating a rift among them. Can the dull-witted Balarama see through the stratagem?" Just then another huge wave was coming at him, and it was much larger than the earlier one. Yuyudhana sensed that it would do more than merely wet his legs or thighs. Yet he did not care to rise from there. He was sure that even if it wet his clothes, they would dry in no time. This gave him satisfaction, but the thought that the salt in the water would stick to his skin, made him wince. But even as the thought was occurring in his mind, the wave rushed at him and engulfed him. It caught him above his waist. As the water receded under him, it left a cavity, destabilising him. Laughing to himself, he lay face upward. Another wave was on its way, and, forewarned, he got up from there, his nose, mouth, and eyes filled with sand and salty water. He slowly walked up the hill.

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Chapter 26

AFTER his dinner, Yuyudhana slept on the soft mattress spread in the front-yard of his house. The mattress was made of elephant grass. The Anarta country in which Dwaraka was located* was well- known for elephant grass. The Yadavas were famous for weaving mattresses out of this grass, which was grown in abundance in that country. In summer, especially, the only bed on which one could sleep with minimum discomfort was the grass mattress. A row of mattresses were spread in Yuyudhana's front-yard. On them lay his father, Satyaka, his sons and grandchildren, stretching their limbs. However, the newly weds, despite the sultriness, slept indoors, in separate rooms and in the space at the back of the house or in its shadow, where they were reasonably secure from prying eyes. In this coastal city, it was more comfortable to sleep on the ground floor than up on the terrace. The winds from the sea were sometimes so forceful and came with such speed that it was not comfortable to sleep on the terrace. Yet, the newly weds did not hesitate to sleep on the terrace. The old women made a joke about this by telling the newly married husband, "Your wife may be carried away by the fury of the wind. Therefore, take the precaution of entwining your legs with hers, holding fast to her waist even in sleep!"Dwaraka's old women might have aged, but their words were eternally young in their liveliness and sprightliness.

When the bustle among Yuyudhana's sons and grandchildren went on, he and his father, Satyaka, lying down on mattresses side by side, held their own conversation. The father and son had been very close to each other right from the start. After his mother's death ten years ago, Yuyudhana spent a lot of time with his father. The two persons to whom he was most deeply attached were his own father and his senior friend, Krishna. In Krishna's company he felt more free and would talk without inhibition. Their talk was wide-ranging, involving this country, that country, war, peace, inter-state relations, commerce, and so on, endlessly. Yuyudhana was aware that his father, a great warrior in his time, was now in poor health. He couldn't go out, and spent most of his time at home. His thoughts revolved round his past, his past experiences. Old man Satyaka did not like the sea. He didn't like Anarta country itself. It was his regular

refrain to say, "A man should always make his home on the bank of a river. Then he will have access to sweet, drinking water. Cultivable land. Plenty of cattle. What is there on the coast? Nothing but salt water, sand, corrupting commerce, year-long sweating. Don't tell me about your coastal lands. What city in the world can compare with our Mathura?" His father had repeated these words perhaps a thousand times! Wasn't it thirty three years ago that the Yadavas, scared of Jarasandha, had fled to the coastal land and settled there? Satyaka had said to his son, "Look, Yuyudhana, you were at that time sixteen years old.

You could hardly understand things. You won't understand correctly the difference between our Mathura and this Dwaraka. Back there in Mathura, it is not sultry all the year round as here. In summer, it is certainly very warm, but it is a dry heat, you don't sweat as here. In winter, you can work as much as you want, and still you won't get tired. How can the cows and buffaloes yield as much milk in this wretched climate as they do in Mathura? Well, we escaped from Jarasandha's torture. And who was that meritorious one who killed Jarasandha? Isn't he a son of a girl from our lineage? What's his name? It has been fifteen years since that event. Then we have to return to Mathura. Even now my ambition is to go back and die there on the bank of the river Yamuna. If my body is burnt on that bank, I shall go to heaven." The son had to suffer this sort of talk often.

Yuyudhana knew quite well that his father's desire to return to Mathura had become intensified since Krishna got Jarasandha killed by Bhima. As long as she was alive, his mother, too, was talking of returning. Now eighteen years had elapsed since they left Mathura. But Yuyudhana himself had become acclimatised to the coast. He was not only used to the sea, but was obsessed with it. Till sixteen, it had been all play for him. It was only then that real life began and he had been living it here in Dwaraka. Didn't the Yadavas become wealthy through overseas trade after coming here? In the Aryavarta, the Yadavas of Mathura did not count for much in the eyes of other rulers. The ordinariness and commonness of the Yadavas stood in striking contrast to the splendour of the neighbouring Kurus. It was said that the Kuru Ksatriyas looked down on Yadavas as inferior Ksatriyas. Now the ruler of Hastinavati, Duryodhana, had come to them. Not just to beg for armed forces. He was there primarily to get money to finance the war. Yuyudhana asked, "What is the point in leaving this coastal land which conferred wealth on us to go to a poor land where our main occupations would be cattle-rearing and agriculture, both relatively less wealth-yielding occupations?" .

His sons and grandchildren were talking among themselves in a loud tone. Satyaka asked his son, sleeping on the next mattress, "It

seems from Hastinavati an emissary of Duryodhana has come. Is this true?"

"Hum "said Yuyudhana simply. The old man was silent. He had lost most of his teeth. When he said 'hum', it sounded like 'Am', a question. Even Yuyudhana who was so familiar with his father's speech could not distinguish between 'Hum' and 'Am'. After he clarified that he had meant "no "his reply, Yuyudhana explained why Duryodhana himself had come from Hastinavati. In spite of the drone of the waves, Satyaka could make out his son's words. He turned his half-sleepy eyes towards the sky, sat up, and asked his son, "The war is between the Pandavas and their enemies. Wasn't it Pandavas who killed Jarasandha? Therefore, it is our Dharma to side with them. What do you think?"

Yuyudhana, "Of course, most definitely, yes. But Balarama has such a twisted nature."

The old man, "What was that again?" He held his left ear open with his left hand, to hear better. The rushing wind forced into the ear and the words of his son were lost.

Yuyudhana, "Yes, what you say is right and fair. Krishna also says the same thing. But Balarama has a crooked mind." At that juncture, Yuyudhana saw a shadow behind. Suddenly all talking in the yard stopped. When he turned back, he saw Balarama himself, in flesh and blood, standing right there! Yuyudhana felt stupid. Not that he had any reason to fear Balarama. It was because Yuyudhana thought that it was easy to talk ill of a person physically before him but it was most embarrassing when one was talking ill of him who was absent. But then he had arrived there suddenly!

Balarama said in anger, "Yes, Satyaki, Balarama's mind is crooked. Why, Balarama himself is crooked. Yes, you are right, Yuyudhana." There was anger in his voice. If Balarama had shown no reaction to the situation in this way, Yuyudhana would have felt very guilty and uptight. The sudden outburst of words from Balarama gave him a sense of relief. It also helped him to speak more freely.

Yuyudhana, "I was speaking the truth. If you have changed in the meanwhile, I beg you to forgive me. Please, come and sit down." He showed the guest his mattress. Appropriate to his royal status, Balarama was clad in full silk from waist to feet, the thick hair on his chest uncovered due to sultriness, his head donning a crown. He sat down with natural ease. He began to press the fingers of his left hand against his left chin repeatedly.

Yuyudhana asked, "Have you tooth-ache?"

Balarama, "It is the two left upper teeth. They are loose. See, here,

yes, here." He was feeling the affected tooth with his tongue. He continued, T feel like pulling them out and throw it away. But the root is still not fully loosened up. Now my right upper tooth is also giving me the pain."

Yuyudhana's father, "I too, have suffered it. It is hell."

Yuyudhana asked Balarama, "How old are you?"

Satyaka, "Wait, I shall tell you his age. In relationship I am his elder brother." After some mental calculations he continued, "I am seventy-nine. Let us say, eighty. Balarama, you were your mother Rohini's first-born. You were born within a year of her marriage. Your father married, on the same day, your mother and her four younger sisters. At that time, I must have been seventeen or eighteen. I worked hard in that marriage, extending all-round help. Your father was the same age, as I. Your mother and her four sisters were from the Paurava lineage. His other seven wives were daughters of Devala, the brother of Ugrasena. The other two wives were servant-maids. In all, your father had fourteen wives. If you want, I can reel off the names of all the fourteen. Do you remember the names of all your mothers in order of seniority?"

Balarama made an effort to recollect the names mentally. They did not come out fast enough. His mother Rohini, then Indira, then Vaishakhi, Bhadra, and what were the last names? Sunamni was the last, but he was struggling hard to complete the list, but with little success. Stayaka helped him out, reciting the names, "Rohini, Indira, Vaisakhi, Bhadra, Sunamni, Sahadevi, Shanti Devi, Shridevi, Devarakshita, Vrikadevi, Upadevi, Devaki. Sütanu and Vadava, two servant-maids. Look here, you don't even remember the names of your own mothers. This is no matter to be proud of. It doesn't redound to your credit."

Balarama felt insulted. He was also angry. He retorted, "Elder brother] Satyaka, why should anyone marry so many wives? If there were seven sisters, why should one man marry all the seven? It would be so difficult for the children to remember so many names. Shouldn't one realise that it would be hard for one also to remember the names of so many wives?"

Satyaka was unable to see whether Balarama spoke these words in fun or in irony. He was just happy that he could successfully recite the names and with such speed. Satyaka took great pride in his ability to remember and identify, among the Yadavas, who had how many wives, and which wife had borne which children in the Anarta country. Yuyudhana intervened to change the tone and tenor of Balarama's thought, and said,

"Father, you have still not told us Balarama's age, which is what

you had really set out to do."

Satyaka, "Oh, you mean his age? Wait, I shall get it. His mother's marriage took place when I was seventeen. He was born within the first year of the marriage, and he was the first-born. This means he must be about eighteen years younger than me. Now, count yourself. I think it would be sixty-two."

Yuyudhana, "Well, it is an age when teeth fall. Am I right?"

Balarama, "Elder brother, Duryodhana has arrived from Hastinavati. It seems Bhishma is now one hundred and twenty years old. He has all his teeth intact. He can bite into pieces any pan-cake, no matter how hard. For those who live according to the Dharma, teeth never fall, "Satyaka intervened immediately, asking, "Then are you alleging that I whose teeth have all fallen am a violator of Dharma?"

Balarama, "No, I didn't say that. All I wanted to say was that a pure celibate will not experience a fall of teeth. But I went beyond that. This is because, in general, the bachelor's body retains its power relatively longer than that of others. Look at my father who married fourteen wives. How many years did he lie bed-ridden like a corpse!"

Satyaka did not relish these words. Yuyudhana also did not like such attitudes. Now Yuyudhana was sure that Balarama had come there to discuss Duryodhana's request. Though formally not yet coronated, Balarama went about considering himself the ruler of all the Yadavas living in the Anarta country. Usually he would send for Yuyudhana if he wanted him. But today, he had himself personally come to Yuyudhana. Yuyudhana was able to guess the reason for this and the background to it. Perhaps Balarama wanted to throw in his lot with Duryodhana in the coming war. Yuyudhana thought, "Since Krishna is not in town, Balarama wants to give the impression that he has consulted me, his friend. Or may be he wants me to persuade Krishna to change his position from pro-Pandava one to an anti-Pandava one." However, Yuyudhana was sure that he would never lose to Balarama in a verbal contest. Since he was not accustomed to beat about the bush, Yuyudhana went straight to the matter.

Yuyudhana, "To what do I owe this rare honour of your visit?"

Balarama was feeling perhaps embarrassed because he had overdone his harsh attack on his own father. But the straight question lightened his heart. So he told Yuyudhana, "Well, I just thought I would take a walk towards the sea. Sometimes if there is moonlight, the boats arrive in the night carrying merchandise. If you don't go occasionally to make a surprise check, and thus put fear in their hearts, those in charge of transhipment would steal. Wouldn't they? So let's go there together. Come along with me."

They went together to the shore. They didn't go straight to the anchoring place, but turned left to get behind a cluster of thorny trees. After reaching there, Balarama said, "Let's sit here." Facing them were the waves. White froth. The noise of the waves regularly rising, falling and then turning into tiny particles.

Yuyudhana said, " I see the boats coming."

Balarama said, "Yes, they seem to be arriving. But sit down. I have to discuss something with you." He placed his hand on Yuyudhana's shoulders and made him sit down. Then Balarama also sat down, and began to knead his chin gently with his finger to assuage the tooth-ache. Though the waves came one after another with a roar, his mind was focussed on the tooth-ache. Or may be the attention paid to pain was simply a conversational gambit. He was figuring out how to begin the talk.

Yuyudhana himself opened the score, "Has Duryodhana come to enlist support for his side?"

Balarama, "You see, I am anxious that we, Yadavas, should present a united stand in the matter. We, Yadavas, have deserted justice. We should shun kinship sentiments and attachments, and take a decision purely in conformity with the principle of justice. You and Kritavarma, can discuss the problem and send away Duryodhana with our promise of support. Don't you think this is the right thing to do?"

Yuyudhana, "What about Krishna?"

Balarama, "How can one depend upon him who is never in town and roams everywhere? Now he has even lost his independent thinking. Do you think a person who is obedient to his wives' words can settle political issues with any sense of justice?"

By now Yuyudhana clearly understood what was in Balarama's mind. Obviously he was anxious to decide this important issue without Krishna's participation. Why talk of intentions? He thought, Balarama had already made up his mind. He must have given Duryodhana his word of support. And it was no secret that Kritavarma was a staunch follower of Balarama. His strategy apparently was to win the backing of Yuyudhana, a close associate of Krishna. He suddenly realised the point of Balarama's accusing Krishna as a slave of his wives. But what was Krishna's fault in this? Actually the matter concerned Balarama's bad relations with Rukmini's brother. But Krishna did not really side with his wife, in the ensuing rift between her brother and his brother. He also did not side with his brother. But what else could he have done under the circumstances? After all, from the beginning there was no love lost between Rukma and Krishna. No friendship could have developed

between the two because when Krishna eloped with Rukmini, her brother had vowed that he would never enter his city again before killing him. Then he fought Krishna and was defeated. He established his own new town and lived there till his death. He never visited his father's town again. Yuyudhana reflected on the episode, "When it is a legitimate mode of marriage for a Ksatriya to elope with his bride, Rukma should have accepted the situation and cultivated his relationship with Krishna, after the marriage. He stuck to his guns, the fool, and nursed his humiliation. He never visited his sister's home. Never once spoke to his brother-in-law. He had joined the Jarasandha group and wanted his sister to marry Sisupala. Even after Krishna had Jarasandha killed and he himself had finished off Sisupala, Rukma's enmity against Krishna did not cool off. In fact, it had intensified. He never invited his sister and never spoke to her. Never again saw her face. He even threatened his own father, saying that he would cut off the parent-son relationship if they continued links with Rukmini and saw her again. Thus he managed to alienate her from her parental roots. But how could a woman's attachment to her natal home disappear even if many years elapsed? So Rukmini decided that even if her brother never visited them, she would herself take the initiative to visit her brother and see that her links with the natal home blossomed again. How could Krishna deny this pleasure to her? She was a mother of a daughter, born after first ten male issues. The first three sons were married at the time. How could Krishna refuse when she, tears in eyes, said, 'Let's not be stubborn in pride. Allow me to visit my natal home'. Krishna was no stubborn mule like her brother. So he had sent her to her brother's home. With her went her adolescent son, Pradyumna, and a couple of body-guards. Pradyumna was her fourth son. Rukma was at first, it seems, adamant and refused to speak to a sister who was visiting him twenty-five or twenty-six years after her marriage. But Rukma's wife chided him and counselled him to talk to her. It was then that he went to see her. She prostrated at his feet, which she touched with her fingers as well as tears. But the brother's tears fell on his sister's head resting on his feet. Rukmini was by nature a very affectionate, sentimental person. She was not just beautiful. She was full of patience, peacefulness and affection. When enraged Krishna was about to kill Rukma who had opposed his elopement, she prevented Krishna from killing him out of her brotherly love, didn't she? Yuyudhana asked himself, "I was then sixteen, and driving Krishna's chariot. I saw all this with these eyes of mine. Once stubborn pride begins to melt into tears, wouldn't the re-union follow as a matter of course, especially when it involved an affectionate sister like Rukmini? Well, he saw to it that his sister stayed on for three months with him. He accompanied her to her husband's home in Dwaraka for the first time. Rukmini told her brother, 'Brother, give your daughter, Shubhangi, in marriage to my son, Pradyumna. Let that be

a symbol of your having forgiven me and the total abandonment of your anger. This, my fourth son, is no match for your daughter in the beauty of appearance. People from Vidarbha have the reputation of having fair complexion. Pradyumna has more of his father's complexion.' Rukmini could not help laughing when mentioning it, in Krishna's presence.

Krishna intervened to say, 'Rukmini, I can understand your making the suggestion. But I have a suspicion that Shubhangi and Pradyumna are already secretly conspiring towards the same goal!'

Rukmini taunted her husband, saying, 'By the way, did you advise your son not to simply wile away his time in her mother's company, but come back carrying off your maternal uncle's daughter, and trained him accordingly?'...." When Yuyudhana was recollecting the past, Balarama raised the issue of Duryodhana again. He asked, "For a man, who is more important? His wife or his elder brother? Anyone who forgets the ~Arya Dharma is bound, to mix up politics and squabble among women folk. Don't you think?" Then suddenly he spoke in anguish, "Ouch. I get such a sharp, shooting pain even if the tongue touches the tooth fractionally." He started to pass his fingers over his left jaw. Yuyudhana did not reply. The sight he had directly witnessed in the past stood vividly before his mental eyes, "In the palace he had built in Bhojakataka, after refusing to return to his own town, after the celebration of the marriage in a spectacular fashion, the following day, there was gambling in the court hall. At play were Rukma and Balarama, with a number of invited kings looking on —Venu from Ashmaka country, Aksha, Shrutavarsha, Chanura, Anshuman, and Jayatsena of Kalinga country. Balarama was a clumsy and inept player. One requires skill and confidence as well sharp intelligence in gambling. Also concentration. One must have acquired mastery through constant practice. If one has nothing but the arrogance arising out of weal th amassed through commerce on the high seas, all one can do is to let the money flow out. But how can he win? After staking and losing things brought for the marriage procession — elephants, chariots, gold, ornaments, and clothes — how can he not start a row? Rukma rudely shouted at Balarama, 'Once you sit for gambling, you have to sit right through and not desert in the middle. Why do you kick up a fight because you are losing? Borrow from me or from the kings assembled here?' 'Well, Rukma shouldn't have spoken such words, especially to newly acquired in-laws. The assembled kings guffawed loudly, clapped their hands, and began to quaff the drink specially brewed for the occasion in the palace. Nothing surprising in this. The kings came from distant places to attend celebrations like marriage in order to drink, gamble and be merry. Balarama was also drunk, and he replied in a challenging tone, slurring his words, 'You Rukma, do you know to whom you are speaking? I am the king of the seas.'

Balarama stammers both when he is drunk and when he is angry. Rukma was not as drunk as Balarama. Therefore, he could have been more restrained. Krishna is very true in saying that one suffers worse from loss of sense when one is gambling than when one is drunk. It is because of the effect of the situation that this happens. Rukma spoke provocatively, 'A bumpkin who doesn't know dice-game. Claiming to be a Ksatriya, he doesn't know even to throw dice. The Yadavas of Dwaraka are not real Aryans.' No sooner these words were uttered, than Balarama's eyes became blood-red, with volcanic wrath. From where he was squatting, he jumped on Rukma and got hold of his throat, like a tiger. Before the others realised what was happening, Balarama broke his neck and killed him, standing in a daze. The kings saw him in this state trembling with dread at the presence of a corpse in a house of wedding. The worst of it all was that the father of the bride was killed by his uncle's elder brother! How many royal servants, yelling with sorrow and fear, fled from the site. Rukma's children, grandchildren, wife and other relatives ran to the dead body and fell on it with uncontrolled sorrow. Meanwhile, Krishna who was exchanging courtesies with the women and children of Rukmini's parental home, renewing old connections through a newly forged relationship, rushed to the scene, followed by Rukmini who held the head of her dead brother between her hands. But who had the guts there to say that what Balarama did was a crime? Till then whoever had imagined that Rukmini possessed such a powerful throat, talking so loudly? She suppressed her grief, went straight to Balarama, and screamed, 'You fellow, I used to bow to you respectfully because you were my husband's elder brother. Had I even an inkling that you were a brute and a butcher, I wouldn't have done it. My elder brother who was for such a long time without any contact with us, was happy by himself. When I, of my own accord, took the initiative, asked his daughter's hand for my son, to reinforce our relationship through marriage, the very next day after the marriage, you did this act, worthy of a dog.' Then she turned to Krishna who was near the corpse and said, 'You decide as to what punishment should be meted out to this fellow.'

What could Krishna say? He stood with his head bent low as if he was weighed down with his elder brother's guilt and shame. He was the target of all eyes. After all, they had given the girl of their house to his son in marriage. And wasn't it his brother who had committed that heinous act?

How swiftly Balarama justified his act and himself, saying, 'Krishna, recollect how you got married to this woman standing near you. Jarasandha had planned to enhance his power and influence in the south by getting the daughter of Vidarbha's king, Bhishmaka, to his adopted son, Sisupala. It was his grand design to expand the sphere of his influence to such a degree that eventually it would

encircle Dwaraka's Anarta country and gobble it up. And didn't we counter this strategy by planning to prevent this alliance, carry off that girl, so that it would humiliate Jarasandha and that it would also earn us the friendship and support of this girl's father? When you were trying to get away with her, Bhishmaka didn't chase you. But Rukma came after you. He had followed you clearly with the intention of killing you. Wasn't he the chief disciple of Jarasandha? In spite of the lapse of so many years after the marriage, he continued to nurse his enmity towards us. Now that there was no eligible bachelor among his old friend's families, he came down to accepting our boy. Let that pass. Do you know how he abused me and the Yadavas? Are we non-Aryans, as he alleged? Jarasandha was killed by Bhima of the Pandavas. You killed Sisupala. It was my good fortune to finish off Rukma. Please advise your wife not to meddle in high politics. Would you advise her or shall I teach her the lesson?'

Rukmini burst out, 'Unworthy wretch, control your tongue when you talk.'

Balarama roared, You bitch, shut up your mouth. Don't bark.' What should poor Krishna do in a situation like this? Could he admonish his wife to support his elder brother? Or should he challenge his elder brother to a fight in the in-law's house for the offence committed in a fit of anger? How could he have resolved the situation, as he stood with a bent head and remained dumb with cracked lips like a piece of stone? He stood there in a posture indicating guilt, as if it was he, not Balarama, who had committed the offence. Didn't this terrible incident occur a year ago? Maybe a little earlier. I recall that the summer had not yet begun then. The days were pleasant and the nights chilly. From that cataclysmic day, poor Rukmini who was ruddy and red in complexion grew pale as if her blood was being drained away. Like a considerate husband, Krishna now spends a lot of time with her to lighten her burden of sorrow."

Balarama mumbled, trying to see that his tongue didn't touch his teeth, 'Either this tooth should fall or this pain should cease. Do you know what a torture it is?' Even the few bits of clouds in the sky had been scattered away, leaving it a clear blue. Moonlight. The twinkling of the stars. The waves softly shining.

Yuyudhana spoke, "Balarama, it has never been your nature to beat about the bush. I, too, am like you in this. Let's be frank and straight. Let me ask you a question not directly connected with the matter you want to be discussed, you who didn't know the game played with Rukma and expectedly lost. You knew that he hadn't taken the initiative and invited you to play. Getting angry at your defeat, you killed him. If what you did then was right, then don't you agree that, on the same lines, the Pandavas who had been deprived

of their all, including the clothes they were wearing, by Duryodhana in gambling, should have killed Duryodhana then and there, as you did in the case of Rukma? Weren't they wrong in not killing him?"

Balarama was in total confusion, a confusion which drowned even his tooth-ache. He managed to ask, "What is it you are saying?"

Yuyudhana, "Shouldn't you spit on the face of this Duryodhana and counsel him to implement the condition-of the dice-game that they should return Pandavas their kingdom, instead of canvassing support for him in the coming war?"

Balarama felt his very legs giving away. Suddenly the tooth-ache returned with sharpness. But Yuyudhana continued relentlessly, "I know that Duryodhana is your friend and your disciple in club-fight, and that you are filled with affection for him. Also you have the womanly stubbornness to do just the opposite of whatever Krishna wants. Look into your own depth, into your soul. If you think that your killing Rukma was just and right, then by the same logic you must support the Pandavas. Otherwise right-a way hurry to Rukmini's palace and beg her to forgive you."

Balarama could see that Yuyudhana had employed great skill in piecing together the various parts of his argument to produce an irresistible impact, pushing him into a hopelessly tight corner. In fact the Rukma episode had been tormenting him always, even in dreams, destroying his mental equanimity. It was a thorn in his soul. He answered, "Did you say that I have affection for Duryodhana? In the same way, don't you have affection for Krishna? In all your life so far, have you ever even once conceded that Krishna can err? Have you thought about this? You follow your master, faithfully and blindly like a dog. How could you perceive and understand the justice of what I am saying? His not for me, but for you to look deep into your soul." His words came out rapidly, in disregard of his tooth-ache. As the pain increased, he later pressed both his jaws. His words made Yuyudhana speechless for the nonce. Balarama was in no position to wait for his reply as the pain was just too much. All the muscles of his face became contorted in acute agony. But something struck his mind suddenly, and he paused to say, "Look, tomorrow I shall be here after overcoming this pain. Let's sit down and talk over things carefully and responsibly. None has till now said to me, 'Balarama, you are guilty of committing an injustice'." Without even asking Yuyudhana whether he would accompany him back, Balarama left the shore alone, as his feet hissed, treading the sand, homeward. Birds began to scream from the thorny trees on the shore. Yuyudhana thought they were disturbed by the noise made by Balarama's hurrying steps. And there was moonlight, too.

He went on sitting. The ears used to the voice of the waves, found

them now silent. The moonlight was covering with vagueness all external shapes. Yuyudhana was still smarting from anger at Balarama's words. He asked himself, Is Krishna my master and boss? Am I a dog that never deviates from its master's direction?' He consoled himself immediately with the thought that more than understanding of relationship with Krishna, Balarama had deliberately spoken to enrage him and confound him. Yet there was some layer deep down that remained impenetrable and silent, unyielding its meaning. So far he had had no occasion to reflect consciously on that relationship. No chance to weigh things. Krishna was five years his senior. He was the one who had put the Yadavas in the position where they were in, and he took responsibility for it. He was the wisest among the Yadavas. His thinking and judgements were wide ranging, covering with a grand sweep the transactions of the entire Aryan universe. In personal matters he was a most affectionate and compassionate person. As far as he could see, he and Krishna never saw themselves cast in the roles of master and servant or slave. Yet he now saw that, since Krishna was wiser and more capable, he had always deferred to his wishes, opinions and decisions. At the same time he asked himself in justification, what's wrong in accepting a better opinion? Yet at the margin of his anger against Balarama there was something that needed better understanding. Wanting to sleep, he got up and started moving towards the town. Then suddenly he heard the noise of the waves. Suppressed by his consciousness, he looked back. Shimmering like the sheen of silver sheets in sunlight, the waves sparkled in the moon. The spectacle tempted him to stay for a while and watch it. Then he moved to the spot where the waves rose to the level of the sand and returned to the sea. He squatted on the sand, watching the waves, exposing his chest and shoulder to the water- laden wind from the sea. His eyes began to look back into the past, farther and farther. How old was he when he first met with Krishna? Twelve or thirteen. At that time, Mathura city was ruled by Kamsa. Kamsa was cruelty itself. He did not hesitate to put his own father in the prison. He had crowned himself king. Was there any Yadava who had not been in his prison? Who was allowed by him to live in happiness? He remembered how his father would make lip-signs to the children if they ever dared to employ even in their games in the street such words as the palace, the king and related ones. Such was his reign of terror. Distrust dominated the air, and nobody in the street was worthy of trusting. Everywhere spies incognito were deployed. Even when children played at king, they were seized by the soldiers and interrogated. They were whipped and tortured, forced to yield information about their elders' subversive opinions about the king and his regime. In fact, the whole city was itself one vast prison where none was free and everyone was gripped by fear. The whole population, from the children to the old, lived in mortal fear of their

king. On Kamsa's birth-day, everybody had to carry huge pots of milk, wear freshly washed dress and wear smile on their faces, and shout victory slogans in his favour. Or else the spies would take care of the disobedient and disorderly. The spies enjoyed the milk, butter and cream. The people could easily identify a spy when they found a person or his family enjoying plenty of milk and its products without keeping cows or enjoyed excellent food without raising even a little finger to cultivate the land. When the city had so many men, why didn't anyone put an end to Kamsa? No, they never had any fear of their soul, but the fear of their body came in their way. Moreover, such ideas as fighting injustice and oppression could arise only when people gathered together and thought together. Who could be trusted as a friend in Kamsa's kingdom? There could be no community action when people did not trust each other. Kamsa himself had no faith in his own people. He had imported men from Jarasandha's kingdom to man key offices in the administration, the army and the spy system. This made the people even more scared, and Jarasandha was reputed to be ruling the entire east through the exclusive employment of naked terror. He had made Kamsa his son-in-law by offering him two of his daughters in marriage. If there was any resistance, Kamsa could always depend on his father-in-law to send his troops. Compared to the mighty armed forces of Jarasandha, what was the tiny kingdom of Mathura? They would just trample Mathura under feet. How large was that army? A vast one. And nobody knew for sure how large it was. And that made things more difficult. An unknown factor can grow into a menace sky-high feeding on imagination!

Then there were astrologers in plenty to exploit and work on the fear and the nerves of the people. They would easily catch the ear of the tyrant. They would warn him, 'Great King, your life is in danger. Efforts are under way to kill you. If not by old people, by youth. Beware!' And they were richly rewarded by the king. The security officers seized the youth recklessly in search of potential assassins. This indiscriminate harassment of youth became inevitable. Which youth would carry any unambiguous outward sign or indication of his being a future murderer? The seized youth was put in prison for four days in a windowless, dark room and whipped. Yuyudhana remembered that he himself, as a boy of eleven, was arrested and put behind the bars for three days! Then they had let him off eventually, warning him not to indulge in plans to kill the king or his officers. Even those who had never thought of doing such things felt strongly provoked to think on those lines!

Yuyudhana extricated his mind from its entanglement with the memory of the years lived and left behind. At a far distance, he saw a giant wave on its way. It was pushing forward absorbing the entire moonlight into its green colour. Feeling that the time spent that night

on the sands had been worthwhile, he sat totally immersed in watching the onward rush of the wave. The elation induced by the sight invaded all his nerves. He had not had such an experience recently. All on a sudden, he recollected something. Well, he had had a comparable experience of elation in his boyhood once. He was not alone in experiencing it. It involved the whole of Mathura city, its entire population. It manifested in the huge crowd that had collected in front of the palace, a crowd whose size was beyond all imagination. That was when Krishna jumped on the tyrant, Kamsa, and killed him after tumbling him down. Yuyudhana's body had vibrated in excitement,and he had become almost unconscious with joy. Krishna was then just eighteen. Krishna had just arrived in Mathura from Vraja with his elder brother, this same Balarama, to enjoy the annual ritual celebration of weapons conducted by Kamsa. Krishna and Balarama were visiting Mathura for the first time. In this ritual, Kamsa presented for public view the weaponry of his army in the name of Indra to create the illusion that he was an equal to Indra. He wanted the people to feel that he was an incarnation of Indra. The officials used to display the very weapons personally used by Kamsa himself. The royal minions would proclaim, "Is there any warrior in the three worlds who can bend this bow of the king? Can anyone of you lift it and bend it?" But these challenges were never met. Who had the guts to take them up? If somebody claimed that he could do it, he was forthwith put behind the bars or, worse, executed. Thus, the myth was perpetrated that no mortal could handle that divinely protected bow! Some pretended to believe in the myth to please the king but there were some who genuinely believed in it. Anyway the spies who were like listening walls or who heard from behind walls, would know everything. Maybe the tyrant's power was limited, but could one ignore the power of the spies? Thus developed the myth that Kamsa's bow was actually Indra's legendary bow itself. Thirty-year old Balarama and eighteen year old Krishna had both grown up in Vraja in the household of Nanda Gopa, the cow-herd. They had been brought up on balls of butter and plenty of pancakes. Thus generously fed, they were used to strenuous physical work as they had to graze the cattle in distant pastures and actively participate in agricultural work. They had the build of hardy rural folk. The royal minion in charge of the bow had announced: "This bow is the bow of god, Indra, mentioned in the Vedas. In all the three worlds, there is no mortal excepting King Kamsa, who is an incarnation of divinity, who can touch this great weapon and still survive." All the spectators who had thronged there, appeared to be awed, and then respectfully bowed to it. The official added for effect, "If an ordinary mortal touches it, he will instantly burn to ash." This was supposed to make the crowd more fearful and respectful of the king and his bow. Krishna suggested innocently, "Shall I try to lift it?" The official answered, "Well, if you are married, you can do so only if

you are prepared to make your wife a widow!"Krishna stepped forward, and not only did he lift it, holding it straight, but he also bent it, holding it against his chest. In the process, he managed to break it into pieces because its bamboo had worn out over time. The crowd was astonished. Someone declared, "This youth must be an incarnation of God." The rest picked up the idea and bowed to Krishna with reverence. Even the official propagating the Kamsa myth, switched over to the new belief in Krishna's divinity. He rushed to Kamsa to give him the bad news. The tyrant, adept at creating myths, fell a victim to the new myth that Krishna was divine. Then, out of sheer fright, the tyrant ordered the keeper of a rogue elephant which he himself had been scared to handle, to let loose that animal on Krishna and have him killed. Nothing daunted Krishna, who, even under the most trying conditions, kept his cool. If a snake bit him, he would get hold of the creature and patiently examine whether it was poisonous or not. Otherwise how else could he confuse that huge elephant, forcing it to lose direction and dash against a stone wall? When it became vulnerable, he hit it on the head and had it killed. It took extraordinary gumption to do all this. When the news of the peasant lad from Vraja killing the royal elephant spread in the city, and the belief in Krishna's divinity gained strength, Kamsa had the chief wrestlers of his court, Chanura and Mushtika, challenge Krishna to a fight.

The wrestling ground was overflowing with the crowd. Kamsa watched the match sitting on his shining chair placed in the front balcony of his palace. Below, the red earth was softened and levelled with water. Chanura and Mushtika were reputed to be the best wrestlers in the world. They were also reputed to disregard the rules and conventions of the game. In particular, they did not respect the norm that in wrestling one should defeat an opponent but never kill him. They were utterly cruel and heartless. Yuyudhana remembered, "When my father, sitting next to me, said that the poor youth was walking straight into the jaws of death and for no good reason, why did I feel acute pain in my stomach? After all I didn't know Krishna then, was not acquainted with him. Indeed, I did not even dream that later we would become such close friends. I was a kid still playing marbles. He was a youth of eighteen, who had killed an elephant. Yet all my attention riveted on him, and my mind was flowing towards him. In the contest, when Chanura fell down how the spectators laughed with one voice! Not worrying about whether there were any spies around, they sighed with anxiety when they found Krishna tired. There were two contests — in one fight, the forty-year old Chanura was pitted against eighteen-year old Krishna, and in the second, thirty-year old Balarama faced a slightly older Mushtika. But the crowd focussed its attention on the fight between Chanura and Krishna. Krishna employed the strategy of tiring Chanura who, being

forty, could tire easily. When Chanura was reaching the point of exhaustion, Krishna did not merely tumble him to the ground, but applied pressure to his throat, choking his already short breath. At this, the crowd grew wild with joy and clapped in applause—maybe Kamsa was already dead hearing the clapping. In one instant, Krishna jumped to the balcony where Kamsa was sitting in his shining throne, his eyebrows raised. Krishna got hold of the throat of Kamsa who had terrorised the whole population; Now he didn't even raise his voice, didn't resist, but simply collapsed, paralysed. Krishna then shouted, 'Before I killed him, Kamsa was dead. All I did was, simply break his neck.' Perhaps he spoke the truth. There was no doubt that even before their master's death, Kamsa's body-guards had turned into motionless stone. Meanwhile none seemed to have noticed Balarama vanquishing Mushtika.

Those feelings then first born in the twelve-year old boy, feelings of admiration, affection, fear, respect, and others, have since grown stronger and fused into a deep bond of friendship. All sense of manliness and self-dignity of the elders had been killed by the fear of the tyrant's absolute rule. Krishna got together the younger people and taught them how to live with courage and dignity as men. Had I grown under Kamsa's tyrannical rule, would I have developed any courage, moral courage? I hear the birds chirp like a flute, and Krishna calls these birds Venu or flutists. Yes, to repeat the question, would I have become morally courageous? My mind assured me again and again that it is false to describe my relationship with Krishna as one between a master and his faithful slave, the dog." Just at that time, Yuyudhana heard the words, "Who's there?" He knew from the voice itself that it was Nandaka, the city's night watchman. Yuyudhana turned back, and said, "It's me ", and identified himself. Nandaka recognised him and asked him, moving closer, "Why are you sitting like this here at this time of midnight?" Like Yuyudhana, he, too, was a friend of Krishna. In fact, an even more intimate friend. When the Yadavas fled from Mathura in fear of Jarasandha, a Ksatriya had to leave. But as a peasant, Nandaka had no such need or compulsion. Moreover, he did not really belong to Mathura at all. He came from Krishna's Vraja. For a peasant cultivator, it mattered little who ruled. His links with the ruler ceased once he paid him the customary land revenue. Yet because of the background of their boyhood friendship and association, and because of his great love for his friend, Nandaka had left his native village, his land, his father and siblings, to follow his friend to Mathura. He had no mother. He was now not merely a keeper of the security of the city, but he was also in charge of watching the commercial boats to see that no thefts of merchandise in the boats, arriving from the seas, took place. Though he had a considerable number of soldiers under his command for this purpose, he preferred to do his night beats all

alone, without any assistance.

He asked, "Yuyudhana, you have come to the sea?

Yuyudhana, "No, Balarama brought me here to discuss some matter. But then he had very bad tooth-ache and he had to leave. After he left I just felt like sitting alone to watch the waves.

Nandaka, 'Well, I am sure it must have been to ask you to support his idea of joining Duryodhana's side in the war to come. Am I right?"

Yuvudhana, "Did he ask you also?"

Yuyudhana, ‘No, toot h-ache and he had m,

He said, "He was approaching Krishna's friends and relations..." but he stopped to stare at something on the shore, a little far away from them. Excusing himself, saying that he would see him later, Nandaka left Yuyudhana, running on the sand. The bows and arrows strapped to his left shoulder appeared to be dancing as he ran with difficulty. Yuyudhana felt at first like joining him, but somehow he did not warm to the idea of running on the sand. He stood up. Soon the back of running Nandaka disappeared from his sight altogether. He yawned. He felt like going home to sleep. He was curious about the medicine Balarama would use to cure his tooth-ache. He remembered that when his father had tooth-ache, he had applied on the back of his teeth powdered clove before going to bed. He dragged his feet on the sand, went home. The watchman at the door allowed, him, recognising his voice.

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Chapter 27

AS Yuyudhana lay on his mattress, his father asked him, "What confidential matters did you discuss with Balarama for such a long time?"

"Was anybody among our Yadavas in the past as cruel as Kamsa?" questioned Yuyudhana.

Father, "As far as I have learnt, none."

Son, "Then why did Kamsa alone turn out to be so bad?"

The old man suddenly moved towards the son and said, "Do you know why it is ordained that women must observe faithfully our rules and norms? If women begin to question our customs, asking for too many explanations, instead of obeying them, then that is the beginning of the ruination of our society and community, our clan and tribe.

Son, "Can you elaborate and clarify a little?"

Father, "You remember how your wife would flare up when I told her to do something or ask her not to do some other thing, when she first came to this household. Now that she has grown old with a daughter-in-law of her own, she has become tamed. Am I right?"

Son "Father, what is the relationship between Kamsa's cruelty and your daughter-in-law?"

Father, "By way of introducing the main topic. You figure out the connection later, if you can. You know about Kamsa's mother, Ugrasena's wife, a woman of unusual courage. Even foolhardy. She used to ride a horse, don bow and arrows, and go for hunting. You remember the place known as Indragiri near our Mathura. It's a few hours on horse from Mathura. Once she went to hunt in the forest near Indragiri, all alone, excepting for her close companion, Chitra, who may be still alive. Right here in a place called Tamrasthali, she may be still living. Have you seen Tamrasthali? I know what I am about to say to be true because I heard from my father what Chitra herself had narrated to him. With these very ears of mine. That is why then I scolded your wife I am giving the same advice to your

daughter-in-law now."

Son, "Tell me what happened there in the Indragiri forest."

Satyaka narrated, "A woman should not stir out far from home during her period of menstruation. Don't we have the rule that during that time a woman should avoid going to strange and unfamiliar spots with water resources? Well, she wasn't the one who worried about such rules and prohibitions, as she always asked, Why not? While she was there in the forest for hunting, she menstruated there itself. Since it was not advisable to ride a horse when one menstruates, she camped there in a tent. I believe there is a lake near by. She used to go there, bathe in it, unaccompanied by anyone else. Her friends and companions tried to dissuade her from going there in that condition of impurity. It is well known that in such waters evil forces, inauspicious planets, wait to take birth through a human womb. There are countless cursed creatures waiting for such an opportunity. It seems one or two such evil creatures entered her womb when it was in menstruation. Kamsa's mother herself reported later that a black ball of great force travelling at the speed of lightning entered her womb. That very month she became pregnant. She was bound to; and the child born of it, was Kamsa. No Yadava child had the height, size, build and bushy eye-brow of Kamsa as a child. In fact, it was a Raksasa birth, it was too late when his mother rued that her own boldness had undone her. What was the use? She should have been wiser before the event."

Yuyudhana remembered that his father insisted that menstruating women of the family should not stir out, and never go anywhere near unknown waters. He still insisted oh this. Not only father, but elders as a rule enforced this rule. He realised that in spite of so many years he had not taken this rule seriously. In the early years after marriage, his own wife was a little indifferent to traditional norms and regulations. She used to disregard many of the customs respected by the elders. But now that she had herself become an elder, she tried to enforce them on her daughter-in-law. Yuyudhana, reflecting on all this, had a problem: Did these evil forces and cursed creatures waylay only in lakes, ponds, wells, streams and rivers, or also in the sea? As soon as he thought about the sea, his ears began to hear the swishing of the waves. He wanted to clear his doubt by asking his father. But he didn't, as his mind, not only ears, became filled with the sea and its sound. Up there, it was a moonlit sky. Though hidden from sight, the sea was there, close by, with its rolling waves, playing with the moonlight. He was overpowered by the beauty of Dwaraka. After a while, he turned to his father, but found the old man asleep. Recently this had been his father's sleeping pattern. He would be awake now, and then suddenly snoring. Then again after a minute he would open his eyes. Yuyudhana himself

yawned and closed his eyes. The lilt of the chanting sea soon put him to sleep. But a little later he was awakened by a dream. He had started seeing the black, evil force moving with lightning speed entering a womb, saw it repeatedly. He wondered in the dream whether that forced entry did not pain Karna's mother, did not scare her. Again in the dream, he himself became scared, and woke up with sweat. His father was in deep sleep. He sat up. The drone of the sea had subsided. The moon had come down, casting more shadows than light on the front-yard. Yuyudhana knew he wouldn't get any more sleep, and yet he lay down on his back, his eyes open. His mind was focussing on the noise of the receding waves, but then suddenly he had the feeling that everything was unreal. When he realised that his interest in the old customs and rules of conduct had not yet become serious, he wondered whether he should go to Tamrasthali and look up that Chitra. But was she still alive? He remembered to have seen her, visiting Dwaraka now and then. But not more recently, though. If alive, she must be at least ninety. After all, Tamrasthali wasn't very far, a couple of hours journey on horse, parallel to the sea and to its right, straight on. It lay in the direction of Prabhasa. He decided to go on horse in the morning. He had not seen the place inside. He guessed there must be a sufficiently big fort, a gateway fixed to it, plus perhaps some fifteen to twenty houses. Since it was summer, he heard pretty early in the morning the drone of the waves rising and moving closer. He thought that even by the sound itself he could make out that the waves were rising forward. Then he twisted his body to shake off sleepiness.

As the dogs in the streets of Tamrasthali saw and sniffed at the stranger on the horse-back, they began to bark loudly. When Yuyudhana addressed them with words supposed to placate them, the dogs stopped barking and stood wagging their tails. It was a larger village than he had expected, not a village of fifteen to twenty houses but one with about forty houses. There were eight two-storeyed buildings, and the rest, one-storeyed. They were all of one type, built of one style. Not only the walls of the houses but the fort also, were in copper brown colour, befitting the name of the village. Wondering who had given it such an appropriate name, Tamrasthali, the place of copper, the stranger- rider asked a street urchin about the whereabouts of Chitra's house. The little girl asked back, "You mean, the house of our mistress, grandma Chitra?"

Well, father was right. Chitra was around ninety to ninety-five. Her mouth was a toothless cavity. But she didn't look as aged as she should have. She must have been a pretty and sharp girl when much younger. Now she was near deaf. She said, "You want my correct age. Who knows really? What things I have seen with these eyes! With my mistress' death my connection with the palace was totally severed. I have heard that you and that Krishna who killed Kamsa are good

friends. Why should I unnecessarily visit Dwaraka? Now times have changed greatly. But Krishna never forgets to visit me and talk to me."

Yuyudhana told her that he was sent by Krishna to see her. Removing the golden ring from a finger of his left hand, he offered it to her, saying, "Here, take this. I am here to know from you whether the waters really contain cursed creatures. I have heard people say that Kamsa was born to your mistress through the entry of one such creature. I swear by you that, if you tell me the truth, I shall not open my mouth to anyone else about it." He placed the ring on her palm and closed it with his hands.

Chitra, "Why do you want to know all that old stuff?"

Yuyudhana, "Chitra, I know already a little about the matter. Now as you have said, so many years have rolled by since your mistress died, Kamsa died, and we migrated from that land."

Holding the ring in her palm, Chitra said, "But, Master, I have sworn to keep it secret." This was her final resistance.

Yuyudhana, "Look here. She is dead. Kamsa is dead. I promise you, here, holding your hand, that I shall not tell it to anyone on my word."

Chitra took the ring from her palm and hid it in her waist-band. Then she shooed away the children who had collected in her front-yard. He found her voice still energetic. She asked him in, and placed before him mug of milk. She ordered her grandson's wife who was near the door of the kitchen to leave them alone. Then she leaned against the wall, squatting, and asked, "You said you and Krishna are friends. Didn't he tell you.' "

Yuyudhana, "He asked me to get it straight from your mouth. He said I could get all the details from you. Does he know everything?"

Chitra, "Well, on the day when we were migrating from Mathura to here, he called me aside and learnt everything. I remembered more details then. Now what do you think is my age?"

Yuyudhana, "Tell me as much as you can remember." At that point he felt angry with Krishna because he had not shared that secret with a friend so close as he was to him. Maybe there was no occasion to discuss it. He managed to suppress his anger, and listened to Chitra's story.

Chitra, "Well, it all took place near that water place. But I do not know anything about cursed creatures. My mistress was a very vivacious and beautiful lady. Is it true that you folk here visit from time to time the Raivataka hills? It is an old tradition of the Yadava

Ksatriyas to visit the hills in the neighbourhood. Do you remember Indragiri near Mathura? How old were you when we left our land? It was a hill to the east. It was filled with beautiful flowers of many hues, creepers and green shade-giving trees — a very pleasant, soothing spot. The women of the royal family were all there. Accompanying us were cooks and other servants. My mistress, as I have said, was a vivacious and active lady. Childless and very brave. She chased a deer with her bow and arrows and found herself soon in a secluded spot in the dense forest. There was none about. At that time there appeared Drumila, a king with Raksasa blood in him. Not a complete Raksasa. He was born of a Raksasa mother and an Aryan father or the other way round — now I am not sure. He had established his kingdom in the north of that hilly area, by clearing away the forest. He was a tall, well-built person, clad like our Yadava kings. Don't the people below imitate the dress, eating habits and manners of those above? Our kingdom was close to his new kingdom. He was wearing a yellow silk dress, a crown on his head, a garland of white flowers round his neck and dazzling ear-rings. As she was noiselessly chasing the deer, she encountered him. She was no chicken-hearted woman. For a moment she had the illusion that it was her husband Ugrasena himself standing before her. But where was the comparison between the weak-bodied husband and the strong-built Raksasa? She asked him, 'Why have you come in my husband's dress?' He replied, 'Young lady, I do not wear a disguise. I am a real male.' Should I clarify any further? You know there is a trick in appearing in a husband's garb. A woman can always later excuse herself, if found out, that she mistook him for her husband! The lover's ingenuity lies in providing such alibis. This is the convention." She gave a toothless laugh and a leer.

Yuyudhana, "What happened next?"

Chitra, "Should I explain the obvious? The queen and her entourage did not return to Mathura for a full fortnight. She would get rid of all of us at nightfall by supplying us with drinks. And she herself would sleep the whole day in order to be ready for the night. Only I knew the truth. After all, can one carry on like this without a confidant? Her husband got worried that his wife had not returned even after a fortnight. He was also lying sick. One day, suddenly and unannounced, he came with only two body-guards, reaching there in the night. There was a splendid moonlight. The area was covered with green trees and creepers; and flowers. He came straight to the garden where we were camping. He located the queen's tent and stood at the door. I was then keeping watch at the door. I was scared when I saw him. I had another companion who, too, was scared. She was a servant. Not a companion. Her name was Ila. She was equally scared. Why should he take special note of our faces? Pushing aside the cloth door of the tent, he rushed in, and saw a man dressed

exactly like himself. He stood like one possessed. How could the mistress not be scared? But she was a woman full of courage and grit. She pushed Raksasa, who was in her arms and made him sit by her side. Then she pretended to be furious with the real husband and shouted at him, ‘You stranger, dressed in my husband’s garb, you have come to cheat me. I am a great husband-devotee. I am warning you. I shall curse you,’ Drumila sprang on her husband, hit him hard on the head, and made him fall unconscious. When Ugrasena regained his consciousness, she continued the bluff and explained to him, ‘His make-up was so perfect that I thought it must be you. How could I know he was deceiving? Don’t raise your voice. You may lose face and become a laughing stock in the eyes of the public.’

Yuyudhana intervened, "Didn’t he kill her on the spot?"

Chitra, "There is one type of women among you Ksatriyas, which stands apart. They manage things so well that the husbands know that they are deceived and yet they cannot escape the spell cast by their women. He know she was lying, deep within, but yet he wanted to believe otherwise. Ugrasena was the believing type and she was the deceiving type. That very night we were all packed off. I was put in a dark room, my hands and legs bound. I was tortured till I told the truth. But his wife never gave up arguing, ‘That cheat had just then arrived that night. Saying that it was you, he was chatting with me. Thank God, just then you arrived.’ Well, as I have already said, when a man wants to be cheated, the woman’s words become truth. One more thing had happened. Do you know what? She who had not conceived for four years after the marriage, now became pregnant. The king ordered me and the servant-girl Ila that we should not say a word about the event to anyone."

Yuyudhana, "Didn’t she have any more children?"

Chitra, "Why not? After that first opening up of her womb by that lover, all the other children were Ugrasena’s - all the eight male and five female children, I remember their names even - the boys were Nyagrodha, Sunama, Kanka, Subhumipa, Shanku, Sütanu, Anadhrishti, Pushtiman. The girls were Kamsaa, Kamsavati, Sütanoo, Kankaa,Rashtrapali."

Yuyudhana, "where are they?"

Chitra, "Yes, I shall tell you that tale of sorrow. The first son, you know, was Kamsa. He had such an impressive body-build. Even as a baby, his limbs stretched beyond his mother’s laps, so tall he was. Ugrasena never once fondled it by lifting it or carrying it. But on the occasion of its birth rite, he sniffed its head and accepted it as his child. When that baby was six months old, his wife had another issue waiting in her womb. It was, of course, Ugrasena’s own child. Right?

Who could attend to her post-natal care? She began to conceive children one after another in rapid succession. She was undergoing great physical hardship. There was a child on the lap, drinking milk from her breasts, while there was another child in her belly, also feeding on her body. It is difficult to say why Ugrasena produced so many children so fast. Was it an expression of his joy in a wife with such phenomenal fertility? Or was it an act of revenge against her to destroy her body for the betrayal in the forest? Or was it a male urge to win a woman's love by a display of sexual prowess? Anyway thirteen children came out of her womb. Meanwhile do you know what happened? He loved all the children, both those already born and ones yet to come out of her body. But he ignored totally Kamsa, showing even hostility. He never once lifted the child, never fondled him, never played with him. Never showed him parental love, got his dress wet by the child's urination! Even as he was growing up, Kamsa did not receive any attention from Ugrasena. He came to be treated virtually as the off-spring of a servant, living on the charity of the household. But how could a mother who had conceived him, bore his burden within, and then suffered the pangs of delivering him, tolerate all this?She countered Ugrasena's behaviour by showering extra love on Kamsa. But she also showed outbursts of anger towards Kamsa, an indication of her concern for him. Ugrasena never thrashed the baby, never punished him, but the mother rained blows on him occasionally. After such beating, she would swing to the other extreme — seize and clasp the baby to her body and smother him with kisses. Kamsa must have felt bad as he watched his father lifting and fondling his younger brothers and sisters while he himself was treated like a stranger, an outsider. What would happen to a growing boy under such circumstances? Physically he had grown strong, and perhaps mentally also he must have grown hard within. He never took regular or systematic lessons in archery or the Vedas under any recognised teachers. How could there be any education when there was no love? While the father didn't bother about his education or development, the mother, caught up in the vicious circle of conceptions and deliveries, was unable to attend to the boy. Kamsa could only attain skill in such crude weaponry as club and stone or metal axes. When the son of his flesh, Nyagrodha, attained eighteen, Ugrasena attempted to put the crown formally on his head, disregarding his eldest son, Kamsa. How could a mother who had borne Kamsa take lying down such a gross injustice meted out to him? She confronted her husband with the question, 'What is the meaning of this discrimination?' Even at that point he should have told her the truth. But he didn't. Yet, knowing fully that she was guilty of infidelity, he produced thirteen children out of her. She raised her voice and demanded an explanation of why he was depriving the eldest son of his right to the throne. By that time, Kamsa himself had come to know the truth about his birth. You

remember my mentioning the servant, Ila. Well, that one was a loud-mouthed girl, and she blurted out the secret to Kamsa. You know, she is fit to be only a servant, never a companion. As soon as he learnt the truth, Kamsa went to his mother and asked her about it. That mother who was bed-ridden, exhausted through too many conceptions, and deliveries, and drained of all blood, touched her over-size son's face and shoulders gently and affectionately. Then she answered, 'Child, you are my son, beyond dispute and doubt. Equally I am your mother, and the rest is of no importance." This son with burning eyes made straight to the court where Ugrasena was seated with the chief priest, ministers and public leaders. Standing before the king defiantly, he shouted in a terrifying voice, 'Right today, will you or will you not crown me as your heir-apparent?' Even at that time, the king could have faced the truth. No, he was scared, and he trembled. He agreed, and the following day Kamsa was crowned. Ugrasena put the crown with his own hands on Kamsa's head. The mother, drained of blood, watched the ceremony, leaning against the large pillow, and shed tears. Then she went into her chamber, embraced all the other children, and used what little energy she had left in her body to cry and shed tears. Her condition worsened. Ugrasena could not foresee the coming events. Maybe she could look into the future more clearly! Not through conscious reasoning, but through instinct, as it were. She cried so much that day that it had adverse, poisonous effect on her body, and within a week she died, her head resting on her husband's lap. Even in that unconscious state, she cried three times, 'I cheated.' He embraced her dead body and mumbled, 'Yes, I allowed myself to be cheated.' I was right by his side, and I heard it myself. After her death, maybe he got busy with the idea of tracing the root of the deception played on him. He lost sense of the external world, and went deep into himself. He abandoned his royal duties and responsibilities, and began to mother his kids — especially the youngest. He fed them with milk, and put them to sleep on his lap, like a mother. I used to instruct him in the work of taking care of the children. If this was what was happening in the domestic front, in the public field something else was happening. Kamsa built up a faction totally loyal to him, and managed to get hold of the reins of the administration. He changed the city's security personnel, replacing them by his own men. He replaced the elephant-keepers, dismissed the army chiefs, packing the army with his men. Then began his reign of terror and death. . Four of his brothers, Nyagrodha, Sunama, Kanka and Subhumipa, were said to have drowned in the river and died, all together. Their death created more terror than sorrow among the populace. There were whispered speculations about the incident. After another month, two more brothers were said to have been carried away by a tiger when they were playing in the back-yard. Of course, there were no eye-witnesses. Nobody asked from which direction the animal had

come, because at the back of the palace was river! Impossible to imagine a tiger crossing Yarnuna to get into a crowded city! That, too, when it was evening. Ugrasena shouted in anger and sorrow. As a result, the following day the heir-apparent had him quarantined in the sickness-room and locked it. He ordered that none should see the king because the doctors had said he should be allowed to take rest undisturbed. The other small children just disappeared, and none knew anything about what happened. Of course, the official explanation was that they died of vomiting sickness. All the deaths were said to have taken place within a week. At least that was what the people thought. We, in the palace, know simply that they vanished all of a sudden. But none of us opened our mouths to ask how that had happened.

After finishing her account, Chitra turned towards the door. She saw her grandson's wife standing near the threshold, making some gesture. Chitra responded by getting up and going into the house. Yuyudhana was sitting still. He began to review his experience as a boy in the light of this new knowledge, and what he had seen and heard about Kamsa and his administration, now appeared in a new form of their own accord. The silence that followed her depature helped him to acquire a clearer picture of the past. Drumila was half-Raksasas. But even the Raksasas were human. Kamsa was not a consumer of human flesh, certainly. The thought that if he had been born to an Aryan seed, instead of a Raksasa seed, maybe he wouldn't have become what he became, agitated him in one corner of his mind. Another perspective opened up. Jarasandha, too, was half-Raksasa, born to an Aryan father and a Raksasa mother. Was it because of the fact that Kamsa was born to a half-Raksasa father, he was prompted to offer two of his daughters in marriage to him? If so, how did Jarasandha come to know about Kamsa's birth, and who told him about it? Or when Kamsa got his brothers and sisters killed and put his father in the prison, he alienated himself from all Yadavas. People kept their distance from him. He had to take foreign assistance in carrying on his administration. In the eastern region Jarasandha was very influential. Not merely through victory in. war, but also through assistance to other rulers, he had managed to extend the boundaries of his empire. It was but natural that Kamsa should have solicited Jarasandha's help. Further the knowledge that Kamsa was, like him, half-Raksasa, must have induced in him love for Kamsa, resulting ultimately in offering him in marriage two daughters. With the emergence of the alliance between Kamsa and Jarasandha, the freedom of the Yadavas came to an end. Kamsa became virtually an agent of Jarasandha, representing his authority in Mathura. A system characterised by spying, prisons, an atmosphere of pervasive suspicion and mistrust, sudden murders, ban on citizens acquiring and using weapons, and prohibition of

even loud talking — these features of the kingdom were interdependent, and they developed out of each o then As Kamsa's dependence on Jarasandha increased, his sense of emptiness arising out of the absence of his own people around him, must have increased his attachment to his wives. Even such an embodiment of cruelty as Kamsa was, he was an exemplary husband to his two wives, and his love for them was proverbial among the people. He never ate, slept or indulged in intimate talk without them. He rested his head on the lap of one wife while the other fanned him. He never gave so much as a glance at the beautiful servant-maids in the palace. The elder was called Asti and the younger, Prapti. Both were childless. Why did he not marry a third? Because of his attachment to them or because of the fear of his father-in-law? It was likely that Kamsa, the childless butcher of his own sisters and brothers, might have developed strange affection for his cousin Devaki, daughter of his uncle, Devaka, Devaki had an attractive face that could invite such treatment. Even at the age of eighty, she has a face that exuded gentle womanly love, feminine tenderness and softness. Of the seven daughters of Devaka, whom Vasudeva married, it was on Devaki that Kamsa bestowed special love and attention. Maybe he did consider adopting one of her sons and groom him to become his heir to the throne. Maybe the childless wives of Kamsa might not have tolerated their husband's attachment to Devaki. It was also not unlikely that the rulers of Magadha felt that the influence of Yadavas would reviveand grow strong in Mathura's administration. The court astrologers of Kamsa were all from Magadha. When they pronounced that Kamsa's death would be definitely at the hands of children born to Devaki, it was natural and understandable that his love for Devaki was transformed into intense hatred. But why didn't he kill her, the body that carried the seeds of his death? Was it such a difficult job for him? He still had so much hidden love for her that he just couldn't muster enough determination to kill her. But, self-love is powerful. He threw her into the prison. His logic must have been that since his death would be through her children, not directly by her, he would rather kill the babies born to her than herself. Thus he had ordered that every child born to her should be hacked to death before his eyes. But didn't he consider in his mind the terrible sorrow that would engulf the woman he loved? Should the cruelty of his self-love descend to the level of butchering the children of the woman he loved, with his own hands? At that point of reflection, Yuyudhana felt like giving his mind rest. He sat immobile, devoid of all thought. The silence of his mind within and of the air outside, was sliced by the buzz of the flies. To it was added the moaning of the sea, active somewhere near by. But deep down in his mind, thinking continued. It seemed that the astrologer's prediction was taken as truth, not only by Kamsa, but also by Devaki and Vasudeva as well. Maybe the Yadavas had been conditioned by Kamsa's regime of terror to believe

it on pain of death! After losing seven children, Devaki planned a strategy in the prison. She managed to convince Kamsa that her next delivery was one month later than it was actually going to be. The fact that she had promptly presented the preceding seven children to be hacked to death, gave credibility to her claim regarding the time of the next delivery. Kamsa was taken in. The eighth baby, a son, was smuggled out of the prison to Be entrusted to the care of Vasudeva's friend, Nanda, and another baby smuggled into the prison as substitute victim for Kamsa's butchery. Couldn't Kamsa distinguish between a four-day old child and a just born one? It was believed then that the baby Krishna already had shown his awareness of his destiny as a killer of Kamsa. It seemed that his adopted parents had systematically inculcated this idea in his mind. Otherwise how could he leap with such astonishingly absolute self-confidence on Kamsa? Or perhaps Krishna was by nature a person of such absolute courage. Yuyudhana began to doze when he was about to think of Krishna's legendary courage of holding a snake to see whether it was a poisonous one or not. Even in his sleep he was still stuck with the story of Kamsa he had heard from Chitra. A foreign seed had fallen aggressively on the soil and destroyed the original, native plants and their roots. The foreign seed was a seed of sin, a seed of unmitigated disaster. Now this had become very clear. What happened was the result neither of Ugrasena's illusion of love for his wife nor of his wife's skill in cheating and creating an illusion of marital faithfulness. It was really due to an aggressive, violent entry, the entry of an evil, sinful seed. The discovery pleased him no end, and he woke up suddenly with a sense of clan. He began to shake his head to become more awake and more keenly alive to where he was at the moment. Just at that time, the old woman came out, and said to Yuyudhana, " Great King, come to eat our humble meal." He tried to excuse himself by saying that he was expected to eat at home. Chitra wouldn't hear of it. Mean while her grandson's wife came out with a copper pot filled with water in her right hand and a wooden bowl. After he washed his face and hands in the plate, she went back with the pot and the plate, and returned with a platter filled with food. She placed it before him.

Pancake made of a millet, yoghurt, ghee, honey, cooked wheat grains, filled the platter. As he began to dip pieces of the pancake in milk and eat it, he turned to Chitra to ask her, "How did your mistress so easily fall for a stranger?"

Chitra, "Please do not, for heaven's sake, talk of her falling for a man other than her husband so easily. You have seen Ugrasena, surely. Isn't he a cowardly and weak fellow? A greedy fellow, too. Now wouldn't he be past hundred years? Then why does he continue to sit on the Yadava throne? He isn't the sort to say that he is old and must give up office. A wavering weakling of a husband. Do you know

what sort was my mistress? She had the heart to hunt a tiger single-handed. And also vital energy. But her body-build wasn't large, just average. Yet she could get on to a horse with bow and arrows, and no horse posed a problem to her. She used to go alone for hunting to the Indragiri forest. Drumila, the ruler of a kingdom nearby, used to arrive on foot. None of you have seen him. He had the shoulder of a tiger, and a wide chest. Any woman who saw him would find herself immediately overpowered by his maleness. At least inside herself. A lioness- like woman, my mistress, could have lost her heart only to such a splendid example of masculinity. When we were returning from there, she confided to me, 'Chitra, I am conquered by him. Tonight he will be coming to my tent. Aren't you my most intimate companion?' You should have seen her then, her downcast and forlorn eyes, slumping cheeks, and sagging face. Who but this Chitra could read her mistress, her innermost feelings?"

Yuyudhana, "Well, for fifteen nights, he visited her tent without fail. Isn't that so? She should have gone off with him. What made her return to a husband like Ugrasena? Wasn't Drumila willing to take her away with him?"

Chitra, "What did you say?" Her hearing was not very good. And the drone of the sea often made it more difficult for her to hear. Or maybe the large pendants hanging from her ears had elongated the lobes. She continued, "You mean his taking her away with him? Later he was so full of remorse and regret that he didn't do it. He sent for me through a servant of his palace, t went there with my mistress's knowledge. I saw that, in spite of their Raksasa birth, they acted and behaved just like us. He pleaded with me, "'Chitra, tell your mistress to come out again fora stroll. From there I shall take her with me to my town. Or let her come to my town on her horse. Or I shall attack her husband with my army, defeat him and carry her off. But I must have her consent for whatever course of action I might take.' But she refused the proposal."

"Why? Did her love for him dry up?"

"What did you say? You haven't seen Drumila. Well, being a man, you wouldn't understand the point. The mistress herself explained it to me one day. She told me that on the first night itself she felt that any woman who received the force of his body would be ready to be his slave, not for one life but for three lives. That was the kind of man he was. And she had the pleasure of his body for fifteen nights. Moreover she was carrying the fruit of their union in her belly. But, after all, wasn't she an Aryan woman? The Arya Dharma lays down the law that a woman cannot desert her husband and run away with another man. She cited the Dharma, and, saying that fate had written that on her forehead, she began to weep. She stayed back. But in the

Raksasa Dharma, a woman is allowed to go with joy even with a man who had killed her husband. The main thing for them is to win the heart and mind of the woman."

Munching a piece of pancake dipped in milk, he said, "But you told me that she gave Ugrasena thirteen children later."

Chitra, "Of course, she did allow her husband right from the start to enter her body, but he didn't have the ability to open the door of her womb first. She herself confessed this to me. But once the first penetration was successfully accomplished by Drumila, it was easy for Ugrasena later to enter her and produce all those children. Are you married? How many wives? How many children and grand children?"

Yuyudhana said nothing. He continued to munch pieces of pancake dipped first in milk and then in honey. Chitra, too, was silent. In the whole episode she had narrated what struck him was the notion of a seed of sin.

He thought of confirming his idea by Chitra, and asked her, "Drumila was not a full Raksasa. Either his father or mother, was a Raksasa. You yourself have said that his behaviour was similar to ours. Simply because he was born to his seed, Kamsa need not have become cruel. If he did turn out to be cruel, whose sin was behind it?"

Yuyudhana added, "I was asking you just to gain some mental satisfaction. Because every sin must have a root, must be somebody's responsibility." He found it very sultry. Outside the house, there was a good breeze. It didn't feel warm or sultry. He wiped with his head-gear his face, neck and chest, and while doing it he heard the din of the sea. He recollected that it was Krishna who had suggested the idea of responsibility. Whatever the topic Krishna invariably brought in the idea of responsibility.

Yuyudhana thought over it and felt that it was listening to Krishna so often that he, too, raised it automatically, almost unconsciously. At that time, Chitra, shaking her head and rolling her eyes the way she used to so many years ago, said, "Once he knew the truth, he should have left his wife. But why didn't he? Thais the question, don't you think?"

Yuyudhana agreed with heron this. He began to wonder why Ugrasena built up an illusion for himself or he knew she lied and yet deliberately believed it to be true. He was puzzled by it. After a while, Chitra herself suggested, "Another idea strikes me. Shall I tell it? You wouldn't be angry, would you?"

Yuyudhana, "Why should I be angry? Go ahead with what you

want to say."

Chitra, "You Ksatriyas are an angry breed."

Yuyudhana, "No, I shall not be angry. Please tell it."

Chitra, "Why rake up now long dead things? It all happened so very long ago. Forget it."

Yuyudhana, "When Drumila was penetrating his wife, his seeds were poured into her. Was it a disaster? Why didn't he accept the fruit of that seed as his?"

Chitra, "How can anybody accept as his somebody else's seed?"

She continued, "Great King, what did you say your name was? You said Yuyudhana Satyaki. You know you people draw a sharp distinction between what is yours and what belongs to others. In recent days this has become extreme. They were like this back in Mathura and have continued to be the same after shifting to Anarta. Into the wombs of how many servant girls do they not leak their semen, make them pregnant? Don't the husbands of the servant girls accept the situation, without discrimination? You fellows sniff the head of a child ass technique of testing the chastity of its mother's womb. Later after every child was born of his seed, Ugrasena, during the naming ceremony, sniffed its head in his wife's presence, and then told his wife that the child was his. But you know I have borne children to Ugrasena myself. At last, some of them may be his though I am not sure. I am not really certain whether they belong to his seed or my husband's. All those who marry a servant-maid of a ruler marry her knowing fully that their wives serve not only their queens but their kings as well. But we don't practise your ritual of sniffing the head. Not worrying about who were their fathers, my own husband accepted freely as his own all the children born to my womb. But why did Ugrasena discriminate against Kamsa as a child?"

Yuyudhana fixed his attention on her, and his sight didn't deviate from the target, even the eye-brows stood still. The sweat that was appearing on the face and the neck had now begun to drip. Even the hand that was wiping the sweat came to a halt. Abruptly. Even the moaning of the sea stopped. His consciousness was aware only of the buzzing of the flies in the room, which, in fact, enhanced the feeling of silence. He finished eating quickly, and refused further helpings. He washed his hand in the plate. He sat still for a while. Then Chitra said, "Isn't it very sultry? Especially inside. Let us go out to the patio where we can enjoy the sea-breeze." She got up.

Some forty kids were playing and making noise around the horse that had been tethered to the pillar supporting the roof over the patio. Yuyudhana had the feeling that some fifteen women had come

out of the houses opposite, waiting for him to emerge from Chitra's house.

Chitra who came out with him, told the curious crowd, "This is not Krishna Vasudeva, but Yuyudhana Satyaki, his friend. He was making a courtesy call, as he was passing through here on some work. It seems Krishna Vasudeva has been away in the Kuru land for the last three months. Who knows when it would please him to return to Dwaraka?"

Yuyudhana thought that the faces of these women had become indifferent, losing interest in the situation. Their ages ranged from twenty to fifty. Some of them carried small babies in their arms. There were also about six-year old children playing near their mothers' feet, in the dust. The children looked dirty and unwashed, obviously coming straight from where they were working — fields or cattle-sheds.

She added, "If you want a message to be conveyed to Krishna Vasudeva, you can tell this man. He will convey them to Krishna when he arrives." One woman, probably fifty years old, laughed. None else. Not making sense of the context of the situation, Yuyudhana stupidly stared at the horse and the children frolicking around it. The children, too, seemed disappointed that nothing exciting was to take place.

Chitra asked, "Do you know who these women are?"

But one woman shouted, "We know who he is. He is Yuyudhana Satyaki". Before he could identify who was the speaker, she had finished her words.

Chitra explained, "You know when Krishna got those women released from the Raksasa, Narakasura, he married all of them, to give them protection. He left twentyfour of them here, building houses for them. He personally saw to it that the forest was cleared for them to provide land. They cultivate it and live on what they produce on it. All these children belong to them. Whenever Krishna visited this town he would bring with him a cartload of jaggery for the kids. When they saw your horse, they thought that it was Krishna's, and were therefore waiting to be given jaggery, waiting like flies to invade slabs of jaggery. Look how they are moving away from here, because they can't get anything."

Yuyudhana felt foolish. The children were scattering. The women, too, were melting away gradually, one by one. The horse was restless as the green flies were biting it.

Yuyudhana asked Chitra, "How is it I see no men in this town?"

She replied, "How can you expect men to be around in the

morning? They are away, working in the fields, tending cattle, hunting and fishing. Women also go with them. Only old women like me and children or those who do cooking, stay behind. Moreover, there are men only in ten houses. In the remaining twenty-four, there is a common and "absent husband, your friend Krishna Vasudeva. Of course, children have grown up in some houses. That's all."

By that time the sun had slanted down to the shoulder level. Though the door of Chitra's house faced West, the sea was not visible from the house-front because the wall of the fort intervened.

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Chapter

28

WHEN he was returning on the horse, the clouds scattered, making way for sun's sharp rays. The smell of sweat hit the nostrils. Yuyudhana began to wonder how the chastity of a mother could be tested by sniffing the head of the child. He went on reflecting, "Yes, I, too, had sniffed my children's heads as a matter of customary practice. But suppose it was the thick of summer, wouldn't then the head give the smell of sweat? If the head had been washed and then exposed to the smoke of burnt sandal, then the head would have smelt different. Besides, in those days he didn't worry about the purity of the seed and such matters. Then what about Chitra's arguments? I never suspected my wife's chastity or fidelity. She had lived with her in-laws all the time and hence her nature had been shaped differently. The thought was comforting. Krishna knew about Kamsa, and he knew it when he was twenty or twenty two. But how come he never broached the matter with me? Was there deliberate avoiding of the topic? Or was it simply because no occasion had arisen? This time when I meet him, I shall ask him about it. What was Chitra's answer to the question of responsibility for the sin involved in Kamsa s birth? I must discuss this with Krishna. He, too, may agree with her words, believe in them- In that case, how can the purity of morals in the birth of a child in the context of marital fidelity be preserved? When the situation seemed as critical as the one in which the tempestuous wind from the sea, rushing from the left, swept away the horse, at such a critical moment, this Krishna has rooted himself there, with the Pandavas. Once he visits these Pandavas, there is no knowing when he will return. He forgets even his wife and children. Leaving Krishna for a moment, I am sure that it was natural that Jarasandha should be furious when he heard of Krishna killing Kamsa, who had acted as a representative of his imperial power. How else could he have reacted to the situation? This idea took Yuyudhana himself by surprise. So far he had seen Kamsa only as an enemy, a Raksasa, a cruel fellow, a butcher. But now? After he learnt from Kamsa s mother's close friend, one who had helped in the delivery of Kamsa, about what had happened, Yuyudhana began to see Kamsa now in his more human dimensions. It was truly said that the strong and powerful fathers showed greater love for their

daughters than for their sons. Jarasandha had only two daughters, Asti and Prapti, and his son-in-law was looking after them with great care and love. A great conspiracy must have been hatched, Jarasandha felt, and the prediction of the astrologers from Magadha had come true. These Magadhan astrologers, accompanied by administrators and spies imported from Magadha, went to Jarasandha, with the two widows of Kamsa in the lead, to appeal to Jarasandha to do justice. When they wept how could Jarasandha remain unprovoked? How could the imported officials and spies enjoy wealth and privileges back in the homeland?

"Nothing could match Krishna's courage. He was as wise as he was trust-worthy. He was then hardly eighteen, but had the wisdom and foresight to anticipate retaliation from Jarasandha. He had calculated that if one killed a tiger, its companion would surely try to take revenge. But the elders were shaking in their shoes. They had been totally deprived of all manliness under Kamsa's reign of terror. But who had collected around him youth, put new life into them and trained them in the use of weapons? Yuyudhana asked himself, as he reflected on the past, "With the withdrawal of the foreign personnel who were manning defence and security posts, the city's civil peace broke down, as criminal elements plundered and perpetrated acts of violence. Weren't there some people who asked, 'Who is this evil youth?' referring to Krishna. If a few persons like my father had not kept their heads cool and supported Krishna and urged people to be disciplined, what disasters might not have overtaken us? Krishna got the active backing of leaders like Shini, Anadhrishti, Akrura, Viprithu, and, even sixty-year old Ugrasena, displaying unusual spirit. If .warriors like Chitraka, Shyama, Satrajita, Prasena, and others who had forgotten their warring skills, had not re-trained themselves and stood staunchly behind Krishna, we would have had to face certain defeat. As my father used to mention, it was at this time that Krishna and Balarama went to Avantipura to sit at the feet of the great teacher, Sandeepani, to gain knowledge. And how fast the two had to learn. They had to cram everything in sixty-four days — Vedic lore, archery and everything! Before he could proceed any further, Krishna rushed back to Mathura as he got the news that Jarasandha's army was marching on the city. It seems this was the time when Dronacharya was flourishing as a great teacher of archery. But how could he have met our need for quick learning? Would Bhishma have permitted the possibility of Kauravas earning the direct enmity of a powerful ruler like Jarasandha? That is why my father advised them to seek knowledge from Sandeepani, though he was located farther away than Dronacharya.

"That is what I call a real war. I remember that even I who was just twelve, could show such courage and enthusiasm. My job was to collect information about the enemies and carry messages. But in

appearance I was no more than an urchin playing marbles. It was Krishna who sculpted me into a boy of courage and determination. He trained me to be so hard of heart that I did not know what fear meant. What else should I call him but my teacher, my Guru? And Balarama has the cheek to say that I am a dog following him faithfully as if he is my master. When Jarasandha laid seize to Mathura, Balarama did fight most valiantly. Certainly, he has courage in plenty. But he lacked strategy. Even now he doesn't have it. Jarasandha had a huge army. And he was not alone. He had the backing of Shrutayu of Kalinga, Dantavaktra of Karoosha, Somaka of Vidarbha, Rukmi of the Bhojas and his own adopted son, Sisupala. Krishna had collected information about such support. But Krishna had declared at the start itself, 'None of them has brought big armies. It is impossible to transport chariots across long distances, involving streams, and rivers. Panchalas who are our neighbours will not help Jarasandha with material. Only the rulers have come. Do as I suggest, and we can beat them easily.' It was Krishna's strategy that brought us final victory. In the forests surrounding Mathura, half our warriors were deployed dressed up as cowherds. The other half was inside the city. We trapped them. On the first day we managed to give the impression that we couldn't defend the fort, allowing them to enter the city. Then our army deployed in the forest attacked them from behind and the army inside attacked them from the front. The combined attack created the illusion that we had a very large army. They were scared and they fled. In the night we chased them and decimated them..."The memory of the operation made Yuyudhana jubilant and he laughed. The horse thought he was praising it and increased its pace. As he was riding fast, passing thorny tress, he remembered, "Recently Balarama has been boasting before the Yadava army that he is the bravest among them. He would add, 'Krishna is basically a coward. He is capable only of strategy, like a fox. True he may succeed once a while. But would all enemies be always gullible enough to fall for his tricks? After all, a Ksatriya earns honour and status only by a show of power and courage. Not by running away.' There are quite a few in the Yadava army who find this kind of talk very welcome and exhilarating. There are some in the army who regard Krishna with contempt. These younger men now boast that they are not cowards like those who fled from Mathura to Dwaraka. And these fellows were no more than dirty kids with leaking noses at the time the migration took place. And some of them were not even born. To these fellows, Balarama is a super warrior. Of course, none can question Balarama's bravery. But was Krishna a coward?

"I remember clearly what happened. When Jarasandha mounted a second attack on Mathura, Krishna realised that it was an act of revenge. Then he and Balarama went to the south, with some young

soldiers, and saw that the news of their going spread fast. Jarasandha abandoned the idea of attacking the city, and, instead, went after the brothers? Didn't he? He had a huge army. They forced the army with its paraphernalia of chariots, elephants and horses, not to speak of ceremonial equipment, chase them from country to country, giving them now an illusion of being close and now giving them a slip. How could such a huge army cover easily such long distances? It was verily like an elephant with its enormous body-burden running after a cat! Tire army was exhausted chasing them. Its elephants were left behind, the chariots got broken, the horses tired, and the infantry men enraged at inadequate supply of food. They were all made to become totally exhausted. The rulers who had joined Jarasandha had to flee for their life. Krishna told me later when I had come of age that if only they had a small army with them they would have finished him in that battle itself.

"Beaten a second time, Jarasandha prepared for another invasion of Mathura. He now planned, if not to kill Krishna, at least to raze to ground the whole of Krishna's city. He asked himself, 'If I don't do this at least what will happen to my name?' This time he had collected an even larger army! Hi s earlier supporters marched from the east. Rukma came from Vidarbha. From the south-west moved Kalayavana and other rulers. It was a formidable massing of forces. It was said that never had such an army been mobilised against one city. It was all to kill Krishna. And he was then twenty or twenty-one. I was fifteen, but I was already a full- fledged soldier. I too had undergone some six months training under Guru Sandeepani. In such disturbed times, how can one undergo orderly education in a leisurely fashion? By that time the new Yadava army had been built up. Young fellows dominated it. It was created through Krishna's leadership, courage, inspiring presence. The spies brought information from four sides, that Jarasandha had accepted the probability of Krishna escaping personally and, therefore, the goal was to arrest all the other leaders, and raze Mathura to the ground. But though Jarasandha was prepared for Krishna and other leaders escaping death and arrest, would he spare their wives and children? We ourselves were determined to fight and die, if necessary, in the fort. The new soldiers proclaimed, 'Let us fight. Let us kill as many enemies as we can. Let us make their blood flow, and let us become the material for heroic legends'. Didn't I myself, a fifteen-year old warrior shout, 'we want war', till my throat went dry? Yet I was angry with Krishna for the words he spoke to the assembled crowd — scared and dis-oriented women, elders and chiefs. Because of that I had mentally dismissed him as a coward. What was it he had spoken to them?

"He had said, 'Grandfathers and fathers, we have news from our spies. It seems the enemy will be attacking with a mammoth army.

His own army is large enough, and his territory is very' large. His allies are all joining him with chariots, horses, elephants, virtually the bulk of the Aryan land, to raze our Mathura to ground. All excepting our neighbours, the Panchalas and Kurus, are with the enemy. But even of this we cannot be certain because anything may happen during a war. If enemy threatens them, there is no certainty that even these two may not succumb. His anger knows no bounds. Naturally. Would his sense of self-importance be satisfied if he did not avenge Kamsa's death? Moreover, twice we have routed him. But at that time we lacked the strength to finish him off.' After his speech, one leader, Shankha shouted, 'It was a terrible mistake you committed when you killed Kamsa.'

"Then Krishna answered, Then would you have preferred to live in slavery? Didn't all of you believe that I was born to kill Kamsa? Wasn't it you also who believed the words of the Magadhan astrologers?' Some of them whisperingly accused Krishna of bringing a great calamity on us. At that, how angry I became!

"Krishna went on to say, 'We have now only two options. One-I and my brother Balarama will leave for ever, and you can all surrender to Jarasandha and save your lives. Two — let us all collectively abandon Mathura and re-settle in a distant territory, which is inaccessible to Jarasandha and beyond the invasion of his army, and where land ends and the sea begins.'

Shankha himself shouted, 'It is the duty of a Ksastriya to fight or die. What would happen to the honour and reputation of the Yadavas if, having demonstrated twice their courage and determination, they were now to turn tail?' Didn't they all shout, 'Shame, shame, shame.' Balarama's voice stood out even in that collective shouting. Ugrasena, who was the king, looked confused and in disarray. So was Krishna's own father, Vasudeva. How my regard for Balarama then increased! He was a real warrior, and I worshipped him then as a true Ksastriya!

Krishna countered us with a question, 'Would not the greatest warriors find it necessary to retreat during a war? And then when they get the right situation, wouldn't they attack and kill the enemy? How could such action be a violation of Ksastriya Dharma?'

Balarama shouted back, 'It is different when there is a war on. But what you are suggesting is the cowardly act of fleeing with our kitchen utensils, mattresses and water-drawing ropes. If we follow your advice, what will remain of the name and honour of Yadavas?'

Krishna answered, unruffled, 'It is all the same. We are leaving simply to survive and live. We are seeking a new land so that we can temporarily keep ourselves alive, and when the time is opportune we

shall proceed to kill Jarasandha.'

Balarama, 'After going away that far, how do you plan to kill Jarasandha?'

Krishna, 'How can I tell you that now at this moment? I shall swear by Ugrasena who is present here, father Vasudeva, my mother Devaki who is now at home in mourning, Rohini who has borne you and who is my senior mother, my idea of leaving is not just to save our lives. If one is alive, there is a chance at least that one shall one day or other kill the enemy. We may defeat him. If we were to try to resist heroically the flood of an army incredibly large in relation to our strength, what would we have achieved but a sacrifice of our lives and a satisfaction of Ksastriya vanity? I am prepared to take the entire responsibility for this decision to migrate. If it gives you satisfaction, you are free to call this a flight from duty. I shall give you time till evening to make up your minds. Remember, we shall have to leave before dawn tomorrow and that means arduous preparation all through this night.'

"Before the evening deadline, one by one indicated their acceptance of Krishna's proposal. Ugrasena himself was the first to do so, followed in that order by Vasudeva, Akrura, my father Satyaka, Chitraka, Satrajita, Prasena and so on — in fact, there wasn't a single dissenting voice. When they all assembled in the evening, they unanimously declared, 'Krishna, on your taking the responsibility and on your assurance that you take on yourself the dishonour arising from this act, we agree to do as you have suggested.' Yet, Balarama was the sole exception, and he expressed his disagreement sitting silently. For whose sake did Krishna agree to shoulder all the responsibility? The Ksastriyas of Aryavarta have plenty of heroism and courage. Their purusartha or goal of life is to fight or die. Only such a Ksastriya who follows this Purusartha can attain a place in heaven and build his own house there! And Krishna cheerfully bore the guilt of abandoning the Arya Ksatriya Dharma, showing the Yadavas a different way which made them look like a pack of cowards, unworthy of their Ksatriya-hood. And what a place to migrate to! We had to cross mountains and forests for weeks to reach it. Could Jarasandha manage to travel this far? It took at least four months to make a two-way trip to this place. And an unknown terrain. And, above all, if he were to be away from his kingdom so long, wouldn't there be efforts to take over the kingdom? The twenty-year old Krishna thought of all this before choosing this site for our new life.

"When people who have been living for generations in a house are asked to leave it for good, how could they easily decide which things should be left behind and which accompany them? Krishna advised

them, ‘Your carts may break down on the way, the oxen refuse to carry and even die overburdened. You may find your burden too much and throw parts of it away on the way later. Therefore, pack only what is absolutely essential. It won’t be very cold there. Therefore don’t take too many woollen blankets. Grains, some flour, and cooking utensils should be enough. Of course, you should take bows, arrows and other weapons.’ No matter how much Krishna protested, the women began to pack indiscriminately and men had to carry the stuff! And one could see the attachment people had, even to useless objects! There were many who left their elephants behind but took their horses and goats, following them from behind. On the way, many became exhausted physically, some ran temperature, and many had their feet bleed through overwalking. A feeling of helplessness took hold of many. On top of it, there was the heat of the sun. Even those who had wholly endorsed Krishna’s idea were now cursing him openly. They even went to the extent of saying that Kamsa’s rule was better than this. Krishna himself didn’t worry about the abuses hurled at him, pretending that he did not hear them. He went up and down, supervising the movement, encouraging people, and involving himself in their problems. He advised them to put their food-grains together and cook together and eat together, arguing that it would help them speed up their journey. But the Yadava families wouldn’t hear of it. Everyone tried to maintain his group’s identity by claiming that the quality of their food-grains was better, and the food cooked by them was heavenly. On the way, each group set up its own separate cooking unit, different groups cooking or eating at different times. What was the use of Krishna working up anger? Old women asked him why he started this hopeless journey at all. As the milk of the cows dried>up and the breast s of mothers dried up, and children died of starvation or heat, people went round apportioning blame for their misfortunes. Those blamed included Kamsa, Jarasandha, and, of course, Krishna. But Krishna who was exiled immediately after his birth from his mother’s land, had no attachment to any land. None had his amazing ability to sleep anywhere anytime, disregarding the exhaustion of the long journey or the strangeness of the land or the unfamiliarity of the climate. Thus many lost sleep from physical exhaustion..."Yuyudhana yawned at this point, as he realised that he hadn’t had enough sleep the previous night. At the same time, the memory of the past sleeplessness haunted him. He remembered, "I was provided with a horse exclusively for myself. I was assigned the task of going about on horse-back to supervise the movement. What a heavy responsibility it was for a fifteen-year old! Of course, it made me feel big. I was anxious to do my job to Krishna’s satisfaction. And Krishna’s words of advice to me were, ‘Yuyudhana, remember that, no matter how well you perform your duties, people may blame you. But never lose your temper and give way to anger. Learn to work

without regard for blame or praise by others'..."

By that time Yuyudhana was nearing Dwaraka and had reached the sea-shore. The sun was right on top of his head. The rising waves of the sea clashed directly with the sun rays.

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Chapter

29

ON the way, he ran into Balarama. His left jaw appeared slightly swollen, but there was no sign of pain on his face. He went close to him and enquired, "How's your tooth-ache?" as he got off from the horse.

Balarama said, "See here ", opening his mouth wide, pointing his finger to the upper jaw. Two teeth were missing. He continued, "After I left that night here, I drank off a whole mug-full of a fiery drink. It was a strong stuff given to me by the sea traders. Do you know how strong it was? It made me jump as high into the sky as an eagle! Once the stuff was inside me, I lost all sense of pain, and pulled immediately with my fingers the two shaky teeth, both at once. It hurt for a while. There was a little blood. In the end sound sleep." He laughed.

He continued, "The heaviness in the air has not subsided, though it is afternoon. What was I saying the previous night? Yes, I was saying that this was a question of the honour of the Yadavas as a whole. Krishna cannot distinguish between honour and dishonour. At least not much. Is it the right and honourable thing to side someone who has insulted and humiliated us by stealing and running away with a girl who belongs to us, by using force?"

Yuyudhana, pretending not to know, "What matter is it that you are talking about?"

Balarama, "Of course, about how that Arjuna ran off with my sister Subhadra. What else?"

Yuyudhana, "Oh, that. Hasn't it been seventeen years since that event took place? She has had a son and the son also got married recently. You chose not to attend the wedding of your own nephew in a huff."

Balarama, "Do you think the mere passage of years will nullify a humiliation? You, too, did not approve of my killing Rukma. You know ksatriya blood runs in this Balarama. What could I do? Isn't it to humiliate a lineage that one elopes with a girl from that lineage and gets away with it? In order to make the nose of the people of

Vidharbha bleed we took Rukmini into our fold. But what cause did we give Arjuna to humiliate us in that way?"

Yuyudhana, "Balarama, you are wrong on both issues. Should the roots of your memory also loosen because the roots of your teeth have become shaky? Don't get angry. It is natural that with the passage of time facts get coloured and distorted by our loves and hatreds. So, let me separate out what really happened from the subsequent emotional accretions. If I go wrong, do not hesitate to put me right."

Balarama didn't say a word. He sat down beneath the shade of a thorny tree on the sand. His face was turned towards the waves. It was seldom that he watched merely the sea. To him the relationship with the sea was never direct, only utilitarian through the commercial boats. But now unusually he was watching the waves, sitting motionless. Yuyudhana got off the horse, ordered it to go home alone, and then sat opposite Balarama. He then addressed Balarama, "Subhadra is a girl from our lineage. Arjuna fell in love with her. That means he was defeated by her. Which means he was defeated by us. He was mad with the desire to possess her. But did she offer any resistance at all when he was carrying her off? No, she, too, lost her heart to him, for his handsome appearance. He got her onto his chariot and went away. Now this is a situation which cannot be interpreted as a humiliation for us. Also, please note that we didn't bring Rukmini in order to make the nose of Vidarbha bleed. Even while we were still in Mathura and prior to our decision to migrate from there, Rukmini's Svayamvara was arranged in Vidarbha. All the kings from Jarasandha's camp attended it. Krishna, too, decided to go there, leaving you behind to take care of the defence and security of Mathura. What was his intention? Nothing mysterious or sinister. After all, Krishna was a young man. An unmarried young man. Don't you think that girls will choose such an eligible bachelor? Also didn't we then calculate that if the girl fell for Krishna, that would mean a guarantee of support and help from Vidarbha in case we needed them? Tell me if I am not telling the truth."

Balarama, "Well, it was because Krishna had heard a mouthwatering description of Rukmini from a wandering Brahmin. That was why he went."

Yuyudhana, "That, too, might be there. But wasn't the main idea what I have indicated, an idea unanimously accepted by you all? Doesn't a marriage involve more than the mere mutual attraction of the boy and the girl, in fact, the interests of the families concerned? Tell me if I am wrong."

Still watching the waves, Balarama said, "All right. Proceed."

Something within compelled Yuyudhana to pause in his narration. Rukmini was an unusually attractive person. Though now a grandmother, she still carried attractive features, denied to far younger women. This made him reconsider his earlier position, as he reflected, "I thought Krishna was not attracted by her at all, and had gone to the Svayamvara for the sole purpose of smashing Jarasandha's nose. How stupid of me! Now my reason wouldn't accept such an easy interpretation. My friend's intention couldn't have been so simple."

To Balarama, Yuyudhana said, "Krishna went to Svayamvara. Right? In the meanwhile Jarasandha attempted to invade Mathura but had to return defeated. The entire Aryan world knows what happened, how he hunted you brothers and finally you made him eat dust, retreat totally exhausted. The entire royalty of the Aryan world had gathered at the Svayamvara. This nineteen-year old youth who had slain Kamsa and forced the mighty Jarasandha to eat dust, was certainly a chief attraction there. It seems that the girl who had heard about his exploits had decided to garland his neck. It seems she had confessed this to her brother, Rukma. This bit of the story I got straight from Rukmini herself later, after the marriage. How could she, a fifteen-year girl know that her brother, Rukma, was under the influence of Jarasandha's group? Thus her brother betrayed her confidence, and Jarasandha got the information. Jarasandha calculated shrewdly that if Krishna won Bhishmaka's daughter, it would make his task of destroying Krishna much more difficult Instructed by Jarasandha, Rukma tried his hardest to dissuade his sister from accepting Krishna. But that young girl was stead-fast, didn't budge an inch. So what could Rukma do then? Jarasandha threatened openly that if the Svayamvara was not cancelled immediately, he and his people would raze to ground Bhishmaka's capital, Kundinapura. The girl's father was scared to death. Jarasandha even made efforts to murder Krishna there itself. But Krishna could sense danger almost instinctively. After all, right from his boyhood, he had played with snakes, taking them out of their hide-outs. Using utmost caution and skill, he managed to return safely to Mathura. The Svayamvara had to stop. Now tell me if this wasn't the first stage in the events we are discussing."

Yawning so widely as to almost dislocate his aching jaw, Balarama just mumbled, "Yes, I remember that I defended Mathura. Yes, I remember that Krishna went there. So what? What happened next?" Yuyudhana saw Balarama's gum bereft of the teeth.

Yawning was natural at this time when the sun was heating up and cooking the sky. Yuyudhana continued, "You know we made our exodus from Mathura with belongings, and came to Dwaraka. There Jarasandha ordered his huge army to lay seize to Mathura from all

sides. But it was a city in ruins, depopulated. There could be, therefore, no war. None knew where the Yadavas had gone and why. Jarasandha thought that they had fled to a forest, waiting for his army to leave and then return. He ordered the whole city to be demolished. His was an army made up of men from many countries. It was already an ancient city, its houses of mud tunnelled by rats. Razing it to ground posed no problem. He saw to it that we would have to build a new city. Had there been a war, he could have at least had the satisfaction of being the victor, the satisfaction of killing enemies who had twice got the better of him. If he went back empty-handed, it would leave him mentally empty. Jarasandha had brought up a foster son, who had greater love for his foster father than for his own father, Damaghosha. He was in charge of the demolition operation. He completed the job in three days. Jarasandha was very pleased, patted him on the back and embraced him. After all, isn't Jarasandha always generous in dealing with those whom he appreciated?"

Balarama, with just a trace of irritation, "Oh, how come you have started praising the one who had razed our Mathura to ground?"

Yuyudhana, "Why not? What if he is an enemy? One must recognise and praise his good qualities. It seems, embracing that foster son of his, Sisupala, he declared, 'Child, Sisupala, I shall see that you get a good gift. It is Bhishmaka's daughter, Rukmini. Haven't you heard about her, reputed to be the most beautiful girl in the entire Aryan land? I shall get her married to you.' Then Sisupala bowed respectfully to his foster father. Jarasandha invited all the assembled rulers there to the proposed marriage, and asked them to accompany him to proceed straight to Vidarbha for the purpose. You know when Jarasandha invites, it is as good as an order. Why all that huge army for a marriage? Then how could they feed that army on the way and while camping in Bhishmaka's capital, Kundinapura? So, the rulers ordered their respective armies to go back to their lands, and took with them just enough number of body-guards, chariots, horses, food and other provisions. We had just reached Dwaraka, and we got the news of all this, the news of their march to Vidarbha. Krishna, as usual thinking ahead, anticipated that Jarasandha would order Bhishmaka to give his daughter in marriage to Sisupala, and if that were to happen Vidarbha would be fully under Jarasandha's sway. My father agreed with Krishna's idea of going to Vidarbha to abduct the girl. This would not only prevent Jarasandha's design of gobbling up Vidarbha but it would also enable them, at least partially, to wipe out the humiliation of the flight from Mathura if they could humiliate him this way. Others who agreed with this were Sarana, Prasena and Chitraka. You also agreed to it. Didn't you, Balarama?"

Balarama, "Yes, Yuyudhana, I did agree to it. I then felt that what Krishna suggested was the right thing for us to do. But do you know what was the actual case? Rukmini was a beautiful girl, and Krishna desired her passionately. That is the true reason why he wanted to elope with Rukmini. Had Krishna revealed to us this truth, instead of the public reason he actually offered, would we have joined in such a purely private escapade in a foreign land, especially when we were exhausted after the migration and we still had to build our houses and ready our land for cultivation? He simply concealed his real motive and gave us a cause that could go well with us."

This version of what happened meant complications for Yuyudhana who had his own version. He wondered whether this was the truth. Sensing the advantage he had scored, Balarama went on, "Yuyudhana, have no doubt about the truth of what I have said. You know how Krishna is crazy about girls and women. Has he been, like us, satisfied with just one wife? After marrying such a beautiful person, he went on to marry seven more wives, and formally accepted as his wives all the women whom he had liberated from the clutches of the Raksasa, Narakasura. He would stop at nothing to get a woman of his desire. The truth is that he fooled all of us and persuaded us to go to Vidarbha. Don't you see?"

Caught in confusion and doubt, Yuyudhana couldn't reply immediately. Sensing his advantage, Balarama proceeded, "You were then hardly a lad of fifteen or sixteen. You became overnight a hero among the Yadavas by driving Krishna's chariot too fast for the chasing enemies. You see I was then thirty-two running. I am more likely than you to have a clearer memory of what happened then. Listen. I shall tell you what really took place. All of us ran south, riding on horses and taking with us sturdy chariots, with the sole objective of humiliating Jarasandha by smearing his nose black. How fast we went, and how hard we tried to beat time! By the time we got there, the marriage had been decided. In fact, Sisupala was to have wedded Rukmini the following day. Bhishmaka was left with no other option. Yes, there was an option. They were either to give his daughter's hand to Sisupala or to have his city, Kundinapura, razed to ground. But if he allowed his daughter to marry Sisupala, that would have certainly lowered his status in the eyes of fellow–Ksatriyas. Then there was his son, Rukma, thoroughly disloyal to his father. He was wholly in the camp of Jarasandha and Sisupala. You, too, objected to my killing Rukma. It was at this juncture that we arrived there, Bhishmaka got the news of our arrival, but thought it prudent to ask us to camp outside the city gates. Otherwise he feared that Jarasandha would have immediately started a war against us."

Yuyudhana, "Remember, you became furious with Bhishmaka for humiliating us by asking us to wait outside his city as if we were

homeless beggars. Even then you were so impatient and impulsive."

Balarama, "Yes, you are right. I am short on patience and Krishna is short on sense of honour. Well, it was a good thing that we were offered hospitality outside the capital. That's what Krishna said. He explained to us, 'Tomorrow is the marriage. It is very likely that the same evening the girl might pass this way to perform the worship of goddess Indrani. Where exactly she would perform it can be ascertained by anyone of you by putting on the disguise of a Vedic Brahmin. Usually it is performed amidst a cluster of trees. It is a purely feminine affair. There will be no men around. At that time, I shall seize the girl by surprise and then take her away as fast as I can. Meanwhile, all of you stay right here. You obstruct those who may be following me at this strategic point and fight them back. By that time, I shall have crossed two rivers. Should the chariot break down, I shall tie her up and carry her off on my horse.' Well, can't you see that it was the girl he was after. Things took place as planned by him. Because it was evening and dark, and so Jarasandha and the rulers supporting him, fell on us and it was we who were physically hurt. On our side, your father had his first teeth knocked in that fight. See here on my back, the long scar resulting from the wound I had in that engagement."

Yuyudhana, "But was it not true that Jarasandha was humiliated, his nose smeared with black ink?"

Balarama, "Yes, but it was I who laboured for it. Not Krishna."

Yuyudhana, "Did Krishna claim that he was behind that success?"

Balarama remained silent.

In his mind Yuyudhana recollected, "As soon as Krishna brought Rukmini and put her in the chariot, I drove the chariot fast. What excellent horses they were! Behind, there were two chariots to guard us. Also four horsemen. I drove so fast that they were all left far behind. How Krishna shouted in appreciation, 'Bravo, bravo, Yuyudhana!' When he said this he was binding Rukmini's hands and legs. She didn't know it was Krishna who had abducted her until I addressed him by name, asking him whether I should go left or right at the point where the road split. Rukmini said to Krishna, 'Yadava, I am not likely to jump out of the running chariot and escape. Please untie me. The rope is cutting into my flesh.' I believe she struggled with him, thinking that he must be some criminal. After settling down tidily inside the chariot, she urged me, 'Please, charioteer, go faster. If it gets dark, then Jarasandha's men wouldn't be able to see direction in this country. Then you can drive more slowly so that the horses won't tire.' Yes, it was at that time that I turned back to really see her face for the first time.' She struck me as of the same age as

myself. But Krishna asked her, ‘They may not know the way, but your father’s men accompanying them would. Wouldn’t they?’ With what charming smile she replied, In a way, father’s honour has been saved. He was starving without food and water because of his sorrow that, as a Ksatriya, he had yielded in a cowardly fashion to the threats of Jarasandha. I and my mother wept so much. Yes, our army might be with them. But I know them and they are not fast. Don’t worry.’ And then how loudly she cried. When Krishna, holding her shoulders, tried to re-assure her, she asked him, ‘Who are you, really? Father! mother!...’ She broke down, crying loudly...

Balarama, "It is not his nature to say openly what he wants to say. His way is very different from that of others. Doesn’t he feel conceited that it is he, not his elder brother Balarama, who is the leader of the Yadavas? The grandfather, the old man, occupied the throne only in name. He wants the ruler to follow his leadership. He married and wants all those technically married to him to be in comfort. He wants to shine as the best ruler in all Aryavarta. Am I right about Krishna?"

Yuyudhana didn’t answer. His mind was busy with his memory, expanding it and filling it with details. Suddenly his mind was deflected by the words that reached his ears. It was Balarama continuing his narration, "In order to see that Krishna got her, I fought without regard for my own life. After all, how many were we and how many were Jarasandha’s men? It was her brother who chased Krishna upto the Poorna river, fought him but got defeated. Later, too, he was fully with Jarasandha and Sisupala. How can you say that I was wrong in killing him for humiliating me in gambling? Was it right for a younger brother’s wife, forgetting all this background, and in the presence of her husband, to abuse me openly like that? Does any woman remember gratefully the good done to her?"

Even then Yuyudhana kept silent. His sight turned to the waves, fixed on one particular wave, far away and appearing to stand still. When the wave moved, his eyes followed it. As he was watching, it appeared to rise to a great height. Other waves rose, too. They smashed the shore with a loud noise while returning. Both realised that the sea was in a tide. They got up. The orderly movement of the waves was temporarily replaced by the tumult of hitting the shore and retreating from it.

Balarama remembered something suddenly, and said, "Look here. At the time I left home, Duryodhana was resting. We can’t let the guest wait. And that, too, a king who occupies a throne, a reigning king. I must hurry back. You may also come. You can meet him."

Yuyudhana, "You proceed."

Balarama, "That means you do not want to see him."

Yuyudhana, "Balarama, I am also a straight-forward, blunt-speaking person like you. He is a king. He is no more than a mere acquaintance to me. Not a close friend. If he has such important work with me, I am sure he will meet me in my own house."

Balarama didn't say anything. He noted mentally that these words of Yuyudhana betrayed arrogance. He said to himself that, after all, he was a crony of Krishna, and then left. By that time the sea had turned more violent and furious. Yuyudhana moved away from it to occupy a higher and safer spot. He stood there as the blue, green sea turned red, reflecting the colour of the sunlight. He saw there the face of Rukmini, bent and weeping with uncontrollable spasms. And what a dazzling and beautiful face it was! It showed some trace of contentment that her father's honour had been retrieved. From that moment on, Yuyudhana reflected, she had run her household, steadily and never compromising its honour. Yuyudhana thought, "Why should not Krishna be happy and content with one such exemplary wife? What insatiable appetite for women! Balarama is right. For every woman gained, one specific justification. Satyajit's daughter, Satyabhama. Jambavanta's daughter, Jambavati. Then the others - Bhadra, Mitravinda,Neela, Kalindi, Lakshmana, in all eight regular wives. He had a form no woman could resist. A wizard in words. Razor-sharp intelligence. Always the winner in battles. Wherever he went they offered him brides, and he married them all. How many women can one man maintain? Perhaps he can produce plenty of children. But can he achieve a successful domestic life with them all? He is seldom in town. He gets involved in the politics of the entire Aryan world. In addition, of course, to his duty of defending the Yadavas. Once he hits the town, there will be quarrel among the wives, rivalries and competition for his attention. They would demand, 'why did you spend three nights with her, and only one with me?' How can the interest in the body of a woman be sustained long after marriage? Maybe his father was right in saying that Krishna was so much out of town in order to escape the attention of his wives! Krishna's father Vasudeva had fourteen wives. He had six less." Yuyudhana's body was becoming sticky with sweat. He lifted his neck to see the sky. No trace of clouds, and he felt an overpowering desire for the rainfall. The sea was immersed in its ritual of repeating the movements, turning round itself, like milk in a huge cauldron boiling red. He continued the monologue, "No, only eight wives? No, what about those women acquired from Narakasura? It is difficult to decide whether Krishna's acts are good or bad. Yes, maybe Balarama is right. I am blind with friendship. But Balarama also has an affliction, the affliction of jealousy. Narakasura was a highway robber. Because of him, Dwaraka had become so insecure that no outsider could arrive there without the support of a

sufficient number of body-guards. Not enough for him to steal utensils, gold and horses.

He used to steal good-looking Aryan girls and fill his harem. He had made Dwaraka a hell; the inhabitants had almost decided to leave it. If at this time, Krishna's courage, endurance and cleverness had not come to our aid, it would have been impossible to hunt him and his band, who could have escaped like rabbits. After his death, we had a problem on hand. It was easy enough to divide the bandit's possessions — utensils, money and jewellery. Krishna said, 'Yuyudhana, how can we abandon these women though they might have been spoiled by him? Let us divide them and marry them.' But why did we oppose his suggestion? We thought that if we married them and produced children out of them, then it would have destroyed the purity of our Yadava race. But Krishna wouldn't hear of it. Instead, he challenged us by declaring that he would marry them all himself. Not merely challenged but actually married them. And how many? As he collected cartloads of children, married women and unmarried women, and entered Dwaraka, how the Yadavas laughed at Krishna's craze for girls and women! With how many of them could he have slept? And how many have borne him children? Any way, Krishna's progeny is immense. Maybe in the years to come all future generations of Yadavas may turn out to be Krishna's progeny..."Yuyudhana remembered Tamrasthali. He lowered his face which was turned to the sky, to watch the sea. The tide was swelling. The waves were shaping into hills, valleys and plains dashing against each other, and returned to the sea. He went back to his reflection, "Why didn't he marry those women? Narakasura, what was his real name? This was the name we gave him because he had made Anarta country a Naraka, hell. How many children the group had, some born after the capture of the women by the band and some born to them through their husbands before capture. Krishna accepted them all as his own children. I remembered Chitra's words. Why didn't we accept them as our children? Even my wife who had condemned Krishna earlier for accepting them said the other day that but for Krishna these women and children would have drowned in the sea out of despair. If I had married one or two of them, would she have approved? What did Krishna's own wives think about his marrying them? I never tried to know these things, never asked these questions then. All I did then was to get angry with Krishna and cut off communication with him. For two months. That was all. I haven't still got out of that sort of behaviour even now. Now Krishna, he will never do it no matter how bitter his quarrel with others. He will wear a smile all the time, a man for all seasons..."Just then Yuyudhana's youngest son, Satyakrita, arrived there, shouting, 'Father, your fire ritual is not yet over, and you haven't had your meal. Your horse Just returned home.

Grandfather was angry that you hadn’t yet returned home, so mother asked me to find you and take you back home."

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Chapter

30

YUYUDHANA performed his Havana rite. He ate once again because he felt hungry. He felt sleepy after the meal. The body had become sticky with sweat. The heat was oppressive, and he hadn't slept well in the night. He knew that his father would scold him if he slept in the day. Father scolded him even now after he himself had produced grandchildren. And Yuyudhana knew that his father would continue to do so in the future. But he felt the powerful pull of sleep. He had a strategy if he wanted to sleep unnoticed by his father. To keep watch over boats in the long distance, Nandaka had built a high tower on top of the store- house at the point where the boats anchored. The tower had an open yard-large enough to allow four persons to sleep. Above it was another smaller open yard exclusively for Nandaka. Nandaka's yard was ideal. The breeze always blew there. Yuyudhana left home to get some sleep in Nandaka's yard.

Yuyudhana had to cross fifteen large mansions, then two rows of two-storeyed buildings and two commercial storehouses, before reaching the third store-house to the left, which had Nandaka's tower. The steps to the tower were outside the building. Once one reached the terrace, plenty of winds blew, drying the sweat. In the first yard of the tower, four young men were sleeping. Towards the wall a man around his age sat watching through the balcony the entire length of the shore to the north. As soon as he saw Yuyudhana,he stood up and greeted him. When Yuyudhana said, T want to sleep above for a while', the man unrolled a mattress and put a pillow for Yuyudhana and left. The windows in the four walls let in a wind capable of sweeping away objects in its path. Though it was a warm summer wind, it was able to dry the sweat blocking the pores of skin, comforting it. As soon as he lay down, he fell into deep sleep in no time.

As he was waking up with the satisfaction of having had a good sleep, Yuyudhana heard a loud cry from below. It was the voice of the person who had earlier arranged the mattress for him, that said, "Get up, you fellows. You, Kratu, get up. The boats are arriving from the north." Yuyudhana got up and looked through the northern window. There were four boats, about eighty to hundred feet long.

They were coming in a line between the land to the left and the limitless sea to the right. There was no tide and the sea had calmed down. He slept the last bit of sleep, hoping that the commercial boats would bring woollen garments, china ware, precious stones, and silver. But once the boats arrived,there was no scope for sleep. There was bound to be the noise of the merchandise being unloaded and the conversation with the sailors. Therefore he tried to snatch a little sleep before the disturbance started. But just then Nandaka came, and said, "Viprathu told me that you were sleeping here. Please continue to sleep. The boats are coming in. I shall go to supervise and organise the unloading of the goods from the boats. God knows where the wretched workers will be lying now due to the heat. I shall have to search for them." Then he left in a hurry. Yuyudhana got up again. One needed to just sit up to see the sea. The windows on four sides were low enough to permit it. Behind him was the sea and in front of him, Dwaraka. Right across there stood Krishna's palace. It was surrounded by eight smaller buildings, housing separately his eight wives. Next to this group of buildings was the house of Devaki and Vasudeva. Next to it was a complex of buildings to house Vasudeva's other wives, seven or eight of them, who had survived. Next to these was Ugrasena's palace. The old man could not move because his limbs had lost their strength. He was wifeless, too, but was still unwilling to give up his office. Chitra had spoken the truth about him. A hundred and ten year-old fellow. Next to Ugrasena's palace was Balarama's house. He had only one wife and the couple could live together. No need for separate buildings as in Krishna's case. No matter which wife he visited, Krishna created keen jealousy in the others. Balarama was better off with one wife. Yuyudhana located his own house in the heart of the city, hidden amidst a clump of trees. It did not get enough breeze. The walls of the fort formed a tidy square. The white-washing done for the spring festival, made the walls shine white and bright. This year's spring festival had to be celebrated in Krishna's absence. He had been away with the Pandavas for three or three and a half months. Once with the Pandavas, he completely forgot Dwaraka. Or perhaps he stayed on to help them work out a scheme to get back their kingdom, but now war seemed certain. Duryodhana, deciding to go to war, was now in Dwaraka to enlist their support. Yuyudhana thought that Duryodhana wanted more than their support, and he had also come to create a rift between the brothers. Then he heard a voice cutting through the murmur of the waves, "You there, pull it harder, with more force. You, Kratu, hold the rope tight." The answer "Yes "rose from a chorus of mouths. Yuyudhana turned round to see. They were just anchoring the first boat, gathering it. He felt like going down there to watch things. In the long boat, in the upper part there were two huge bales, so heavy that it required two men to handle. The bales were swathed in cotton cover and were bound together with

rope.

Yuyudhana enquired, "What merchandise do they contain?"

Nandaka, "Wool blankets." Then he said to one of the men handling the bale, "Kratu, handle it carefully. Otherwise the blankets may get wet." Then he turned again to Yuyudhana to say, "The folk in that world over there have started to produce a new type of blanket. What skill in weaving, and what fantastic designs on them! You remember that last time we had sent them cotton cloth, ivory works and pearls. These have been sent to us in exchange for them." Then he turned again towards Kratu who was so powerful that he was handling the cargo single-handed. Yuyudhana also began to stare at that young man. He was around twenty. Had a generously proportioned body-build. He had large, sparkling eyes. Kinky hair. By then the bales had been moved to the shore. On the floor of the boat there were metal bars, placed on it as if to counter the destabilising effect of tempests, and they had been corroded by weather and the water sprayed by the waves. Though considerably dimmed because of this, they still shone well enough to show that they were copper. Between the metal bars lay fixed china jars. Their mouths were sealed securely so that the jars wouldn't shake. Yuyudhana knew immediately that they contained foreign liquor. He, too, had tasted it on occasions. As Balarama had rightly said, this liquor had the power to send one up into the sky with the speed of a royal eagle. It was not mild like the Soma drink of the Aryans. Balarama saw to it that these jars were stored in a separate building so that none excepting himself had access to them. Quite often, those foreigners sent these jars as free gift. Yuyudhana remembered that his father, Satyaka, condemned this foreign liquor as destroying the morale of the Yadavas, who were taking to it increasingly at the expense of their own, mild Soma liquor. After migrating to the coastal land of Anarta country, the Yadavas had built up their prosperity on the basis of commerce and trade. In fact, the Yadavas were now in possession of far greaterwealth than the Kurus of Hastinavati, who had been flourishing for generations. None in the Aryan world could match the Yadavas in wealth. Yuyudhana felt very sad and pained that the Yadavas had relegated the Soma to a ritual status, and had gone all out for the foreign drink, even to the extent of preparing it themselves. Kratu and three other young men were shifting the copper bars to the shore. They placed the liquor jars between the bars.

As Kratu came ashore, adjusting his dress, after finishing his job, Yuyudhana asked, "Which is your country?"

He replied in surprise, "Why? I am from here, Anarta country. From this Dwaraka itself."

Yuyudhana, "I had never seen you before."

Kratu, "You are Yuyudhana Satyaki, aren't you? I am mostly on the high seas. I stayed back this time because my mother is very ill. I shall go on these boats, carrying cotton cloth, ivory objects, and spices."

Yuyudhana, 'What's your father's name?"

Kratu, "You very rarely visit this spot where the boats anchor, I should have said, never. That is why you do not know me. I am a son of Krishna Vasudeva."

The reply threw Yuyudhana into confusion. Of Krishna's eight wives, which one was his mother? He knew them all very well.

How could his sons, Ksatriyas, wedded to the Ksatriya occupation of archery, be involved in the non-Ksatriya activity of working in the wharf? Then it occurred to him that Kratu should be the son of one of those women liberated from Narakasura by Krishna. However, Krishna had married them only seven years ago. This twenty-year old youth must have been born to his mother earlier than her marriage to Krishna. But this led him to wonder further whether he had been born before his mother's capture by Narakasura or he was born to one of the group after the capture by force. At that time the emptied boats were rowed a little further into the water. Another boat filled with merchandise sailed into the port. Kratu joined the group that was to unload material from it also. A short while after the work of unloading had begun, a woman came there. She was anywhere from thirty-five to thirty-eight years old. She had a tired face. She carried on her left a one-year old baby. She was carrying a utensil filled with food, hanging from a string round her neck. From the shore, she cried, "Child, Kratu, come here, I have brought your food."

From the boat, the son answered, "You needn't have come. I would have myself come to get it."

Mother, "Well, you didn't show up for a long time. And I know that you often forget to take your meal, absorbed in your work, especially when it is heavy."

Kratu, "Besides this boat, there are three more ahead. If I eat no w, I shall be too inert to do the job. The carpenters will be arriving to repair the boats. Look there, in the front-yard of that tower, please wait there in the shade." Then he began to unload the bales from the upper portion. She continued to stand there. The child began to cry. In spite of the soft murmur of the waves, the noise of people talking and the sound of heavy objects being moved, he heard that cry distinctly. He shouted to his mother, "Mother, the baby is crying

because of the sun's heat. Go there. You have shade there, and the breeze blows there. Go and sit down there. In this terrible summer heat the child may catch fever." It sounded like an order. She moved towards the tower, and then started to climb the steps to the yard.

Yuyudhana was watching her. He was acquainted well with Krishna's eight wives. His relationship with them was intimate enough to allow him to visit their houses, and even cut jokes with them and demand from them dishes which they would cook for him. In Krishna's absence, they sent for him if they wanted some work done. But he was absolutely unacquainted with the wives who had been Narakasura's prisoners. They were all scattered, some in Dwaraka, some in Prabhasa and the rest distributed in several coastal villages. Of course, he knew about Krishna's arrangement for their accommodation. He had been merely watching them from a distance, and had never visited their homes. Had never spoken to them. And they, too, had never visited his house. This mutual distancing implied either that he had no need to know them or that they were unworthy of his acquaintance. He tried hard to figure this out, but in vain. Now Kratu caught his attention. He wondered what could be the name of his mother. His curiosity about her was roused. She had steady, shining eyes and she wore the rags of poverty. She had a quiet and contented face, which none of Krishna's eight wives had — a face that endured everything and complained about nothing. She was sitting up in the yard in front of the tower, and she appeared to have very recently recovered from some grave illness. He felt like going to her and conversing with her. But he didn't know her, and he felt shy to approach her abruptly like that. He went back to the store house and climbed the steps. He saw her squatting in the first yard, its windows open, and feeding the baby with her breast. As soon as she saw him, she reacted with a mixture of fear, respect and confusion, and clasped the baby to her body.

Yuyudhana, "Please sit down, sit down. I have just met Kratu. I had not seen you earlier. So I decided to meet you. Do you recognise me?"

Kratu's mother, "Who can fail to recognise Yuyudhana Satyaki in Anarta country?"

Her reply made Yuyudhana happy. He tried to persuade her to sit down. She sat down leaning against the wall. Resting the baby's head against her raised left lap, she began to breast-feed the baby. It was a taut, large and bouncing breast. The scene reminded him of his youngest child." If that is so, when did you see me?"

Kratu's mother, "Wasn't it you who brought us all here after we were liberated from Narakasura's prison? When our marriage took place, you, too, were present."

He remembered. It was he who had supervised the shifting of women and children liberated from Narakasura in thirty carts to Dwaraka. When Krishna married all of them on the shore, one by one they came, with their children if they had any, to garland Krishna. And Krishna garlanded them in return. True, he was there when Krishna married them all collectively. But he had merely looked on, not approved. He remained quiet because he had been in no mood to pick up a row. Now that anger was no longer there. The sight of her made him feel compassion for her.

He asked her, "Your son is working as a coolie. Are you in such dire poverty?"

She replied, "How can I, a wife of Krishna Vasudeva, claim to be poor?" She laughed. It was a laughter that subtly suggested sadness. But there was no frustration or cynicism.

Yuyudhana, "Then why this plight?"

Kratu's mother, "In the early days after the marriage, separate houses were built for us. They made arrangements for our livelihood out of the royal treasury. One year passed, where was your friend? The royal treasury is under the control of his brother, Balarama. Whoever in this town wanted him to marry us? And Balarama, of course, was most bitterly opposed to it. He questioned the propriety of spending money from the royal treasury to feed and maintain his younger brother's countless wives. So they stopped giving us aid. Krishna had gone out of town for some reason. Now what were we to do? Can the stomach wait? Being wives of Krishna Vasudeva, we thought it would be improper for us to do servitude. It would have sullied Krishna's honour. So we decided to engage in minor occupations. My son Kratu was then running fourteen. He was a powerfully built boy. So he took up the work on the boats. I started to produce yarn at home."

Yuyudhana, "The rest?"

Kratu's mother, "How could all of them eke out their livelihood in Dwaraka? Some went to Prabhasa, and others to other places. They took to agriculture, yarn-production and weaving. And it was Krishna who had given us the idea. In this coastal land, there is very little cultivable land. After his return Krishna brought the wealth, which had been plundered by Narakasura, to this place and distributed it among us. For himself, he kept some utensils and gold. Balarama was furious that Krishna had distributed the wealth of the public treasury among his new wives."

Yuyudhana then remembered. Some three or four years ago, a similar rumpus had been raised. He had not been hauled up before the court by Balarama, because he was Krishna's friend. Krishna, too,

did not openly say anything. He just kept silent. Yuyudhana began to piece together his own memory and the words of Kratu's mother. Absorbed in this operation, he didn't hear the noise at the wharf. After a short while, she pulled the baby away from her left breast and put its mouth to the right breast. As she was shifting the baby to the other lap, they heard the sound of things being unloaded. Not knowing what to say further, he asked her, "What is your name?"

Kratu's mother, "Dhriti."

Yuyudhana, "Who gave you the name?"

Kratu's mother, "Who names children? Grand-parents and parents."

Yuyudhana, "Who are they?"

Kratu's mother, "Oh, I come from Sindhu country. I come from an agricultural family. We had very fertile land."

Yuyudhana, "How did you get captured by Narakasura's band?"

Kratu's mother, "Well, I was married. My husband and his people were taking me to their place in pomp and grand style. The bandit group of Narakasura fell on us. Our people tried to defend with clubs and a hand-knife. How could they match the robbers who were professional killers and looters? The robbers fight in such a way that young woman and girls were not wounded. I and two other women were captured. The rest were killed. They looted gold, copper vessels and other bridal gifts."

Yuyudhana, "When was Kratu born?"

Kratu's mother, "One year after our capture?

Yuyudhana, "Born against your will?"

Kratu's mother, "Who desires that gang of robbers? The whole band attacked our bodies, one after another."

Yuyudhana felt sorrowful, as he heard her story. His regard and respect for Krishna who had destroyed that band, shot up. It meant that the bandits did not confine merely to Anarta count and that they roamed in other lands, hiding from authorities. Outside, the noise of the unloading mingled with the moaning of the waves. The waves made louder noise. He asked her, "Does Krishna visit your house?" Her normally mild voice became provoked into an angry shout, "What sort of talk is this?" He lifted his head and looked at her. Her face was bulging with anger. She continued, "What do you take me for? Do you think that this baby was born without his visits?"

Yuyudhana, "Please, don't be angry. I didn't mean anything bad. You see, you are so many. And he has eight more regular wives.

Moreover, he is seldom in town. Even when he is in town "he is busy with all sorts of things. How can he find time to visit the houses of all of you?"

She gave a gentle sigh. Her anger subsided of its own accord. She now spoke in a quieter tone, "I knew that, as his friend you do not imply anything wrong. Now in the last two years or so, he came one day, and then spent three days with me. In those three days he gave me the joy and satisfaction of a life-time. He gave me so much affection. Till then I was angry with him. Angry because he had just married us in name and then abandoned us. Now I can see things better. He has work in all kinds of places. In different countries. He is rarely in town. As you say, even when he is in town he has so many other matters to worry about. And he has eight wives married in spectacular ceremonies and wives who ha parents of high status. And we are also there. And so many of us. How much attention can he pay to every one of us? Even so manages to visit our homes, at least for a day. How can we reasonably expect anything more?"

Out there, the sea seemed to be swelling into a tide. A kind of sadness seeped into him. He looked out through the window waves had multiplied and the sun had leaned towards the sea Th waves which were throwing up the reflected light of the sun appeared grand. The sun's heat blended joy and sadness, and also a kind of up-rootedness haunted them. He turned towards her The baby had gone to sleep. She gently disengaged its mouth from her breast and laid it down on the mattress.

Yuyudhana, "Do all the other wives in your group think like you? Do they have the same loyalty and commitment to him?"

She didn't answer. She waved away the fly on the baby's face with her right hand. The hand that had done this had its five fingers separated, and they appeared to be directed towards him. He wondered whether her answer would be the question, "Do all the five fingers of the palm measure the same?" His own common sense also moved him towards a similar position. He realised that it would be unnatural for the five fingers to be the same. When he was thinking on these lines, the dazzle of the waves reflecting the light appeared to be diminishing. Then she spoke, "I don't worry about others. As for me, all I want is that he should return to my house once again, sniff the child's head, accept it and name it. I have no higher ambition than this. You have seen my son, Kratu, the fellow who was working there below on the wharf. It was Krishna who sniffed his head, embraced him and gave him that name. This was when he visited our home two years ago."

Even as his name was being mentioned, Kratu himself came up to the yard. He was bare-bodied excepting for the loin-cloth, and his

body, his hands, chest, neck, face and legs were all dripping sweat. Kratu was surprised to see Yuyudhana there, and stood embarrassed, as if he had forgotten even the purpose for which he had come. His mother asked him, "Have you washed your hand? Come and eat." His eyes fixed on the ground, he replied, "I shall eat later." Yuyudhana intervened, ." Don't mind my presence. Please eat." Kratu didn't lift his eyes from the ground. Yuyudhana was also feeling pretty awkward, and he said, "You finish your meal, I shall wait." Then he climbed the steps from where he was, to go up to the next yard. It was the last yard. There was a fast breeze that comforted the body. He opened all the four windows so that the wind came from all the four directions. The voice of the waves did not reach that height with any intensity. But the sea was more available visually than through sound. The mind merged with the peace that lay in the distant horizon. His mind was absorbed in that point of peace and he stood quiet for some time. Then he turned away from the sea. There it was, the city of Dwaraka, spread out in all its extent and variety, for his eyes. The eyes surveyed the buildings, mansions, rows of streets, houses reduced to points scattered like stars, and the fort surrounding the city to guard its security. He felt a sense of pride and satisfaction that they had built all that, with their own hands. There was also the satisfaction that this city was more beautiful, clean and comfortable than Mathura and other cities in other lands. His roving eyes rested at last on the landscape beyond the city-walls. Copper-coloured open ground. Beyond that, the Raivataka range of hills. Still further there was a blur. In the opposite direction and behind his back lay the limitless and boundless sea. And the lands that were there came before his eyes. How much land and how many countries, and how many he himself had personally visited! Countries such as Sindhu, Bahlika, Vatadhana, Gandhara, Kekaya, Trigarta, Madra, Uttarakuru, Hemakuta, Kuru, Panchala, Bhoja, Kosala, Videha, Anga, Vanga, Pundra, Champa, Magadha, Kuntala, Pulindra, Kalinga, Chedi, Avanti, Vidarbha, and so on! And within each, how many smaller units! Each with four to ten kingdoms within. And as many kings. And beyond these he knew, how many unknown ones. Himalaya that side, and Vindhya this side. Yuyudhana was full of astonishment at the number and variety of countries. He reflected, "Krishna knows all the details. He knows where is which country and how far away. Also the strength of the rulers and the nature of the rulers." Then he thought of turning towards the sea. And he turned towards it and saw the seamless and endless expanse of water, excepting for the temporary breaches made by the waves here and there. Though distant parts of the sea were invisible to the immediate sight, did it follow that there were areas in the sea without the movement of the waves? The sudden understanding that there was no sea without waves, gave him the sense of having discovered something new! Well, it was said that the

earth constituted a boundary to the sea, but what constituted the boundary to the sea? Yuyudhana thought that none spoke of the shores of the earth. It was absolutely limitless. When he remembered that they had moved from Mathura to the limit of the sea, he thought of Krishna as well. He wondered, "Was he in the Virata city or somewhere else?" He was such a puzzle when he was away from home, because nobody had a clue to his whereabouts, his activities and his thinking! One knew only after he returned and reported. Yuyudhana asked himself, "To whom but me that he will report everything?" He was sure that Krishna would not return till he managed to bring victory to the Pandavas who had assisted him in killing Jarasandha. Yuyudhana began to reflect, "After migrating to this Anarta country and building on the site of old Kushasthala the new city of Dwaraka we prospered through agriculture and commerce. Once we achieved wealth, we totally forgot Jarasandha. Balarama and his associates have forgotten the humiliation with which we fled from Mathura. But not Krishna. He went about reviving old kinship. When blind Dhritarashtra offered the Pandavas a paltry piece of forest-land and sent them word that they should build a town there and live, wasn't it Krishna who placed at the service of Pandavas gold, copper utensils, chariots, horses, and supplied them with Dwaraka's best architects and carpenters? How strongly Balarama argued against our giving away to the Pandavas our hard earned wealth? Why Balarama, all the Yadavas opposed it. Didn't they all argue that after the misfortune of being homeless, they were fortunate to gain wealth, and hence why should they part with it for some obscure, unknown party? This was the thinking of the elders also. They argued that the Pandavas might have been children of their aunt, but that aunt had gone as a new-born baby on adoption to Kunti of the Bhoja lineage, and had even continued to retain the name, Kunti. Her birth-name was not known here, but would this be sufficient reason to shower our wealth on them? None of them saw Krishna's long-range planning. Luckily they didn't resist too strongly and accepted Krishna's advice with mild protest. Who else was there near Mathura, in whom we could put our trust? Even if such people were there, would they not avoid us for fear of Jarasandha? Pandavas did not possess a large kingdom. But they made up for it by their courage and valour. The boundless bravery of Bhima, Arjuna's supremacy in archery, and the subdued but substantial skill and spirit of Nakula and Sahadeva, amounted to the total resources of the Pandavas. And what more can one expect? Just near by were the Panchalas, their relations. Far ahead of all of us, Krishna saw that the combined strength of these two would check the influence of Jarasandha in the west. Krishna had supplied the manure at the time when the root had to strike, so that the Pandava plant avoided the fate of withering away. Being so far away from Mathura, it would have been impossible for us to take on single-

handed Jarasandha. How did Krishna manage to beat him? The Pandavas settled down. They cleared the surrounding forest for cultivation. They built a new kind of township. Their rival kins felt jealous, but the Pandavas continued to enhance their status, feeding further the jealousy of their rivals. In all this, Krishna's hand was there. It was he who encouraged them to perform the prestigious Rajasuya rite. How can the rite be performed until one has compelled all the kings of Aryavarta to accept one's supremacy? But did the Pandava possess the strength to defeat Jarasandha? Given his huge army, the wide support of other rulers and the obsequiousness of most kings that he commanded, who but the Pandavas could have brought off the miracle?It was Krishna who worked out the strategy, a highly risky one, of fighting him directly face to face in a cave, since it was impossible to engage his army in a war. No matter what the fight, Krishna never hesitated to take risks, involving even loss of life. It seems Dharmaraja was scared. His fear was, "What if Jarasandha imprisoned his two brothers, along with Krishna? He was, after all, born of a Raksasa mother.' Dharma felt that he would not hesitate to have the three dragged into the mid-street, have their hands and legs sliced, and their skin scraped. Jarasandha was believed to have been under the influence of the violence-prone Bhairava cult of Vamacara. Jarasandha was engaged in a scheme to reduce one hundred and one Ksatriyas enlisted to throne to a heap of bones. That was why he was busy imprisoning princes. As soon as he had imprisoned one hundred and one rulers, he was planning to offer them in a Vamacara human sacrifice ritual by hacking them to pieces. Dharma was scared at the idea of his two brothers and Krishna being part of the group to be so sacrificed! Dharma appealed to Krishna, 'Please, Krishna, I do not want to perform the Rajasuya rite. I do not want to lose my brothers.' But Bhima and Arjuna belong to a tough breed. They were just the type of persons to fit into Krishna's strategy. They immediately agreed when Krishna said, 'Can the timid who are afraid of dangers attain victory? Come with me. What happens to me will happen to you too; whatever the responsibility, let it be on my shoulders.' Krishna was right. Those two had abundant courage, but without Krishna's mental agility and subtlety to penetrate the secrets of the enemy's designs. The three prevailed on Dharmaraja to agree to the idea and then left. Krishna was in the lead, Bhima in the middle, and Arjuna in the rear. They rode on three picked, powerful horses. Krishna possessed a thorough and detailed knowledge of every town, street, stream, river, hill, mountain and forest in Aryavarta. He has an insatiable curiosity about the world, and he questions foreign visitors to learn about other lands and people. He remembers everything so learnt, and visits other countries for one reason or another. Thus he is skilled in identifying and sighting routes. After all, once one has mastered the knowledge about ten routes, would it be difficult to imagine the eleventh? He keeps on

adding to his knowledge, asking such questions of others. What is the distance between Khandavaprastha and Girivraja? Even with the best horses, it will take twenty days at least. On the way, there are rivers Ganga, Shoni, Gandaki and the rest. How many rivers, forests on the way! cooking food on the way. Riding non-stop on the horses, before reaching Girivraja! It was regarded as a site fit for raising a capital city on it. More secure than this Dwaraka. Surrounded by a range of hills. Nestling in the middle, there was space enough to build a city. And a river within, originating there and flowing out of the city. No matter how powerful the enemy and how long the siege, the city was never short of water. The dense forests covering the inner range of hills provided fuel-wood all round the year. And there was a secret route to go out of the city and return, without being observed by outsiders. In the outer range of hills, there was posted the huge army of Jarasandha. The city was surrounded by fertile agricultural land. It seems that even if there was drought everywhere, there was always some rain in Jarasandha's Magadha. How can anyone defeat him in a war? Only Krishna's strategy could do it. The strategy of entering the cave of the fierce tiger, no, even its mouth directly, fathom the secret of its heart and then demolish it at the most vulnerable point! But it was a strategy fraught with spine-chilling danger." The very thought of the strategy made Yuyudhana tremble and shake like a leaf in the storm. He began to sweat at the thought, though the wind was blowing with fury. He looked out of the window. The waves were swinging and smashing, making loud noise.

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Chapter

31

IN the moonlit night, Girivraja created the illusion of being a dream world. It also created a sense of fear. All round was the range of hills, whose body was covered with thick forests, but all looking black in the moonlight. At the foot of the Vaihara hill, sitting in a hot-water pond, immersed upto his neck, Jarasandha watched the hills that had provided natural security to his city. His eyes were fixed on the peaks. As a young boy how often with his mother he had climbed these peaks and then climbed down, early morning every day! Later in the spring of youth, while exercising the body, as he bent the whole body from top to toe, his muscles bulged, looking like stone or metal ready to produce a clank if touched., but today because of over-walking his thighs and knees were aching. He was seventy, no, not quite seventy, and he thought he was not old!... Just then he remembered his mother. She, too, was a strong woman, all taut muscles. Yet she occasionally had body-ache. The royal physicians had diagnosed it as Rheumatism. Jarasandha wondered whether he, too, had the same disease and reflected, "How many days had passed since the ache first made its appearance! These hot springs can melt any ache into sweat and thus make them disappear. Which other town can boast of such medicinal hot springs, as far as I know? Girivraja is a holy pilgrim centre. The water that springs out of the earth is like boiling water, and it was his father who had got built here this raised platform. Beneath the platform, he had cut this narrow canal, no wider than a finger, through which the boiling water flowed." He thought that it was soothing to the aching flesh, and then he dangled his legs in the water. Losing balance, he slipped into the water, immersed in it upto his forehead. Then he soon recovered his position. It made him wonder why this had occurred, which had never happened to him before. He asked himself, "Does it signify something to come?" But he had also immediately recovered his normal stance. Did it mean that any calamity that might happen would be immediately averted? Then turning his head, he looked at the forests in the moonlight, black on the bodies of the hills, and he felt that the secret of the omen was somewhere there in those hidden forests. As he felt the water too hot, he ordered, "Reduce the flow of hot water or stop it altogether. For a while." Then he remembered

that it was the beginning of winter. He asked, "What was there in these forests on the peaks of hills? In the cities there were people living, and at the toll-gates and city-gates, soldiers. But in the forests? Forest means nothing but the wild animals tigers, bears, and wolves. When they fell on you, you tore them with your sword, and even smashed the sensitive centre of the elephant. That is it. Forest means fighting and killing wild animals. How much I have roamed, in forests of so many countries in the nights. Yet why is it that I am scared of the dark or even the semi-dark, and what is there in them to scare me?" Then he remembered the ghosts and devils and spirits. He remembered his mother's tales, told him when he was a child, tales crystallising the experience of her caste and tribe, their practice of moving in the night with torches in hand. The idea was that the ghosts and devils would flee in fear of the light thrown by the torches. But he asked himself, "But in the semi-darkness and in moonlight, do we carry torches? Maybe she told those tales just to scare me to sleep! But my mother s folk, the Raksasas, live in the forests, are more active in the nights. Maybe when she joined father's palace, she, too, started to fear darkness. That reminds me of my two elder step-mothers who were barren. I believe they were sisters. How afraid were they of me as a boy because I showed Raksasa features! Well, they were scared of me till the end. What if one were born to a Raksasa woman? I can't remember distinctly their faces. After all, I was then a mere fourteen-year old boy, and now fifty-five or fifty-six years have lapsed since then, and how can one recall a clear picture? Every time she recounted details of Raksasa behaviour, I felt stunned and yet wanted to hear it again. Such gory details included tales of Raksasa battles, fierce vengeance, incredible wrath, the thrashing of the enemy with the branches of trees suddenly wrenched, flattening the enemy on the ground in order to pulverise his brain with weapons of rock and stone, the ejection of raw, white flesh from the smashed brains, the sacrifice of humans to Goddess Urimari by lining up the victims. More recently the Raksasa people have virtually disappeared from the forests and hills of our Magadha. Father loved a Raksasa woman and how much love he showered on her! Not only because she bore him a son—a love so great that he named him partly after her. Yet what intense hatred he had for the Raksasas as a tribe — he hunted them as if they were wild animals, killed them and skinned them. Not only the Raksasas but all other kings trembled at the name of Brihadratha — sure enough, father was a real manly man..."He ordered the servant, "It is getting too cold. Turn on a little more hot water." Then he returned to reflection..."It seems mother was discovered alone in the forests beyond the Vipula hills. Would she let him getaway? Why, instead of shooting arrows at her or hurling stones or rocks at her or slicing her with the sword in his hand, why did he invite her to a direct hand-to-hand combat? She fought him with tenacity and so tired him out that

he was soon defeated. As she narrated the story of the fight, clasping me to her bosom, sitting opposite father, her chest would swell with pride. And what sense of triumph in father's face'..."He repeated, "Reduce the hot water a little." Then back to the past, ".. Yes, one must marry a Raksasa woman if one wants to produce a son as big and powerful as I..."Then he looked at the image of his huge body in the water.." By the time I attained the marriageable age, father had got the Raksasa eliminated in these countries. It was a great wrong that father did, a very great wrong. He didn't realise that the snake has to be allowed to live because its poison is necessary for medicinal purposes. Well, my son Sahadeva was born in the womb of an Arya Ksatriya wife, falling like dung from an elephant..."Then he began to scrape the dirt from his feet.

While eating in the light of the lamp, Asti said, "I have been yawning five times, one after another, and the food refuses to go inside me."

Her sister Prapti intervened immediately, "I have been counting since I sat down. Father yawned thirty-six times, in all. Sleep is dragging away his eyes."

Jarasandha, "Yes, if you bathe in the hot springs of Tapta Kunda, that is what will happen to you. At least for half an hour after you rise from the spring, you sweat. Today how long I sat in the hot water!"

In spite of his refusal, these two widowed daughters of his served him half-cooked meat curry sumptuously, and forced him to eat it. The juices of the meat dish overflowed. After the death of their common husband, the two sisters had returned to their father, Jarasandha their loriely father, as widows now sonless. He began to yawn again and he was about to end his meal. Then he heard a loud noise. He asked, "Child, doesn't the noise come from the direction of the peak of Chaityaka hill? It is noise as loud as that made by a huge metal vessel falling on a boulder. Who can it be who has the temerity to make a sound that can travel to the palace? I must get him skinned alive." Just then a servant appeared, hearing the master's shout. He waited for a minute to get the royal order to go and see what was the matter. Not getting it, he went out of his own accord to find out the fact. Stretching his body, Jarasandha yawned again, and told his daughters, "These cursed yawns. Children, I shall go to sleep." He began to climb the steps to the upper hall. He felt his muscles and bones now less aching. His second daughter, Prapti, handed him a large mug of toddy, and said, "It is rather large in quantity. Take it and sleep well. By the morning your body will be as light as dry cotton." She sat opposite him, and refused to get up even when he asked her, "Have you eaten?"

When he had half finished the mug, the servant shouted from below, "Great King, it is an ill omen. Someone has torn to shreds the skin of the three drums fixed atop the Chaityagiri peak, and thrown the drums from such a height. Three strangers seem to be involved."

Jarasandha was wild with the servant for starting his message with the words, ill-omen. But at the same time the thought that it was really an ill-omen that invaded his mind. Those drums were provided with the skins of cannibalistic Raksasas whom Jarasandha's father, Brihadrata, had hunted and killed. Brihadrata had got made three large copper drums covered with the Raksasa skin, and they were placed on a pedestal looking like a stove, built on the peak of the Chaityagiri hills. The three giant drums were beaten thrice every day — morning, evening and night, and the awesome sound they made struck a sense of obedience and surrender in the hearts of the people. This sound was accompanied by the long bugles blowing equally loudly. Jarasandha wondered when it was first installed. Then he remembered that it was in the year of his birth that his father had set up the drums. Ever since, irrespective of the seasons, the drums were sounded thrice daily without fail. There was a cupola built over the drums so that they wouldn't soak in the rain.

Jarasandha thundered his order, "Didn't you skin them alive? Drag them here. They may flee taking advantage of the night, in the semi-darkness of the moon-light." Doubting whether the skin of the three would be enough for three drums, he enquired, "How big are they? What is their height and width?"

The servant replied, "We couldn't see clearly in the dimness. Two of them looked large-framed. The third was taller than even you, and had wider shoulders. They were three Brahmin bachelors."

Jarasandha, "Why didn't you capture them and bring them here?"

The servant, "There was only one guard. They said they wanted to see the king, and asked us to bring them here. Then they started moving in this direction. Should be here any time now."

Jarasandha was not just surprised. He was thoroughly confused. He was stunned. He wondered, "Why should those wanting to see me not arrive through the city-gates? Where do they hail from, smashing the drums?" Soon they were there before him. Jarasandha had the feeling that he had seen earlier somewhere the fellow in the lead. It was a dark, attractive face. The one in the middle was the most handsome-looking. The one in the rear had the body-size that roused Jarasandha's love. He was very tall, wore a long piece of cloth, and upper garment. A garland of flowers adorned his neck, and a bar of sandal paste decorated his forehead. Long hair flowed down his back. His step was a symbol of brazen boldness.

The leader spoke, "Blessings to king Jarasandha! We feel a bit embarrassed that we should disturb you when you want to rest. For these two mendicant bachelor Brahmins you may extend a' proper welcome. But we have resolved to receive no hospitality from you until we have finished the discussion of the purpose of our visit to you first. These two persons will open their mouth only at mid-point in the night — the point of intersection between night's earlier and later portions. Therefore, you may now go back and take rest. At the point of mid-night, you may come down or you may send for us to your room for discussions. Shall we squat here till that time? All we ask is a mat made of darbha grass."

Jarasandha tried to sleep but couldn't. They were squatting on the darbha mat in a row in a lotus-posture, like three dolls. Who could they be? Their posture was, in fact, not a full lotus one. The thighs of that giant, Jarasandha thought, could never be squeezed into the lotus posture. His muscles were too hard for such manoeuvres. Even the other two did not have the shrivelled bodies of Brahmins. He speculated on what could be the vow that kept them silent till midnight. He wondered as he turned to a side and closed his eyes. It just crossed his mind that they might be worshippers of the nocturnal God of the grave-yard, Bhairava, and this thought struck a chord of sympathy. But it also created some sense of fear, fear that being practitioners of human sacrifice, like himself, they might have come to capture him and offer him in sacrifice. This fear was there in spite of the fact that his guards kept vigil over the strangers. So he got up and peeped down for reassurance. He saw them squatting there, three figures in the middle of a grave-yard, waiting to be sacrificed. It seemed to him that they had eyes that were still and eyelashes that never moved even fractionally, and their statuesque posture absolutely frozen. He asked himself, "Why did they tear off the skin of the drums and throw down the copper drums?" He realised that from that day there was going to be no beating of the drum. As he began to speculate on the effect of this change on the minds of his subjects, Jarasandha turned to the other side and slept. But once again the mystery of why they had materialised there so suddenly worried him, creating new emotions, new anxieties and new confusions. He felt the urge to go down and ask them straight-away to explain their arrival. But then suppose their response was to stick to their vow of silence till midnight. Then he came to the conclusion not to worry, saying to himself, "They have come for some purpose of their own and let them send word to me at midnight if that is their habit." He decided to go to sleep. He hardened his mind, covered himself warmly with a blanket, and tried to sleep, closing his eyes. Try as he might, sleep refused to come. Convinced that sleep wouldn't come, he thought that trying was a waste of effort. He got up and peeped out of the window. The range of hills in the distance

was growing more and more mysterious and enigmatic in the dark. Midnight was the time when enigmas solidified. He wondered, "How much longer for the talk with them to begin? Was Sahadeva sleeping? Didn't he hear the noise of the drums falling?" Well, even if he did hear, he was of the kind that would just shrug off and go back to sleep! Jarasandha referred to his son mentally as, "after all, he is an elephant's excretion." Suddenly he remembered Sisupala. Nobody called him the son of Dharmaghosha. He was always called Jarasandha's adopted son. He was an embodiment of courage. Jarasandha asked himself, "Why wasn't he born as my son? His mother is supposed to be from the Yadava line. When did he come over to our household, how long ago was it? There in the north, the Kuru Pandavas are growing in strength, and when he was here last time, Sisupala had suggested that we keep an eye on them. But this donkey, Sahadeva, understands nothing. Not even the natural Ksatriya appetite for pleasures ..."The hills ranging beyond the window far away grew darker and more enigmatic. He wondered what the time was, as the moonlight had melted wholly into a dark night. Wondering what day it was, Jarasandha stepped restlessly with his big steps on the floor of his bed-room. As he saw the changing patterns of his shadow in the lamp's light, his attention turned to the strangers squatting below. It was an unbearable curiosity that prompted him to clap and call the servant who was waiting on the steps. The servant climbed up the steps and stood before him.

Jarasandha, "What are those fellows doing now?"

Servant, "They are squatting in the same fashion as dolls in a grave-yard. In the lamp's light."

"Isn't it midnight for them?"

Servant, "I'll ask them."

He didn't want to dissuade the servant from asking them. He heard the voice of the servant coming from below. The servant himself came up and reported, "Now they are ready to talk."

When he went down, they were still squatting as before. Opposite to them was an elevated seat for him, as required by his royal status. The seat was covered with an elaborately embroidered carpet. Sitting on it, he spoke, "I am very suspicious about your presence and purpose here. Why should you, claiming to be mendicant Brahmins, bedeck yourselves with sandal-paste marks and garlands of flowers?"

The one sitting in the middle and who had spoken first earlier, now replied, "Bravo, Jarasandha! Your understanding of the Aryan tradition of conduct is admirable. Since you are only a half-Aryan, your understanding of it, too, is half-right. The Ksatriya mendicant-bachelors do don flower-garlands and sandal- paste marks. Of

course, not Brahmins. If you had studied in a proper Gurukula school, you would have known this."

Whether they were right or not in what they said, they certainly enraged him by treating him so lightly, using his name and virtually calling him an uncultured fellow who did not go through the Gurukula educational process. But he was at a loss to work out a punishment commensurate with their crime, that of damaging the drums and of keeping him waiting till midnight.

He spoke in an authoritative voice, "First tell me who you are."

The stranger, "Before you come to know our identity, first learn one important thing. Our armed forces have surrounded your Girivraja tonight and have seized strategic areas. When we say, our armed forces, do you know whose? The Panchala army under Drupada and Drishtadyumna, the Kaurava army under Dronacharya, the army of Dwaraka's Yadavas under Balarama, the army of the Pandavas of the Kuru lineage under Dharmaraja, and those who had fled south earlier, scared of you — Shurasena, Bhadrakara, Bodha, Salva, Patanchara,Susthala, Sukutta,Kulinda, Kunti, Shalvayana, and their armies, the armies of the eighty-six rulers whom you had captured, and others. No more detail is necessary. This should suffice. We waited till midnight before talking to you because it was during this time that our armies encircled your city and captured strategic positions."

Jarasandha was filled with the idea of the ill-omen indicated by the demolition of the three drums. The spokesman for the three strangers asked, "Don't you still recognise me?" His eyes met directly Jarasandha's eyes. The stranger repeated, "Take a good look at me, "and sat down. Silently. The stranger, realising that Jarasandha was too confused to sort out his identity, volunteered the information, "I am Krishna Vasudeva. Yes, I who refused to give battle when you came at us with all your armed might. I have now returned with an army about the same size as the one you then commanded against us. As for these two, this is Arjuna, the ace archer, who won the bride in Drupada's daughter's Svayamvara. The other one is that very same Bhima who pulled out the main pillar of the Svayamvara hall and hurled it at the throng of Ksatriyas there." Jarasandha's memory became kindled. Yes, he had caused the entire roof to collapse by pulling out the pillar. What power of shoulders ... he remembered that they had all regretted why they had not gone with their armies, thinking it unnecessary at a Svayamvara celebration. The noise of the bygone day still rang in his ears, but soon it stopped, bringing him back to the present. Just then Krishna Vasudeva said, "Well, you had convinced yourself that no enemy could negotiate successfully the solid defence presented by the hills which surrounded your city,

didn't you? Now that very seclusion and security has become a trap to catch a rat like you. But we are pure Ksatriyas. We don't kill humans without adequate grounds. We are not going to raze to ground your city as you did our Mathura. A true Aryan will not take refuge in the security of his army. He stands or falls on the power of his own personal arms. Though all this huge army is there with us, we shall not use it. We offer you a chance to prove your Ksatriya status. Do you accept the challenge?"

Jarasandha felt as if the very foundations of his strong palace had collapsed, and was trying to come to terms with the situation, when Krishna spoke again, "Can you clarify if you are an Arya or a non-Arya?"

Jarasandha replied with some heat, "My Aryan status is higher than that of a cowherd."

Krishna said, "All right. If you are an Arya, then accept our challenge. You can pick any one of us to engage in a hand-to-hand battle. You can fight Arjuna with^ow and arrows. You can wrestle with Bhima. I am ready to take you on through either mode. You also have a personal grudge against me. Therefore, if you want, choose me. I can assure you of one thing; if you choose any one of the three of us and defeat him, our army which has invaded your city like a dark night, will melt away. If you lose in the fight, then we are not interested in annexing your Girivraja. We do not want your Magadha. We shall crown your son, Sahadeva, and then depart. Your father, who subdued and vanquished the Raksasa hordes and expanded Magadha, crowned his mature son, you, and left for the forests to retire, was a brave Aryan. But you, who have refused to crown your son who is so old, are a non-Arya. I swear by the Vedas, that if you lose, we shall crown your son and go away. We shall aid him in critical situations. If you are a true Arya and a true man, accept the challenge and invite any one of us three. Or, else simply admit that you are not an Arya, not a man and not a Ksatriya. We shall quietly depart and cause our armies to retreat."

Jarasandha's physical and emotional temperature rose sharply. He took a hard look at the three. Then he said, "I refuse to fight one who had fled to survive." Then he looked at Bhima with concentration, and asked, "Are you the one who has married a Raksasa woman?" Bhima didn't answer, but Krishna said, "Yes ", Jarasandha got up and went to Bhima and felt Bhima's shoulders with his hand. He said to Bhima, "You come." Bhima stood up with a violent movement.

Krishna immediately added, "Call your son, crown him and hand over the symbols of power to him, because we have no desire to take over this kingdom."

Jarasandha clapped his hands, and the servant ran to fetch Sahadeva. Sahadeva came, half-awake, confused and rubbing his eyes. Even when he received the crown and the sword from his father, he was not aware of what was happening. When Jarasandha said, "Fetch the drummers." Krishna intervened immediately, "The practice of wrestling to the beating of the drums is a Raksasa practice. We do not want it." In the front-yard, the servants stood with big torches, burning powerfully. Jarasandha's daughters, Asti and Prapti, who were till then indoors, came out. As soon as he saw them, Krishna bowed to them and said, "You are my aunts. If you had daughters, they would have been my wives. But I did not have that good fortune." They were confused by the tone of his voice. Meanwhile Arjuna had assisted Bhima to undress and be ready for the combat wearing just one piece of loin-cloth. Jarasandha wore an old loin-cloth, and he tightened up his own dhoti. Bhima's bulging muscles appeared to throw off the reddish light cast by the torches. The muscles attracted the seventy- year old Jarasandha, who had flabby flesh. And soon a small crowd of palace servants collected as spectators.

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Chapter

32

YUYUDHANA re-lived the past in his memory, "How easily Krishna trapped Jarasandha. Krishna was right in saying repeatedly that three-quarters of the fight against an enemy consisted in discovering the secret intentions of the enemy and his vulnerability. Jarasandha was the father-in-la w of Kamsa who was Krishna's maternal uncle. Bhima was around thirty-three or thirty-four. The gap in age between Jarasandha and Bhima was very wide, between thirty-four and seventy! Though seventy, he had not thought it fit to hand over the reins of the kingdom to his son. So selfish and greedy for power he was. Suppose Jarasandha had asked Krishna, 'Don't you know that wrestling contest should not be held between persons of unequal age?' Fortunately, he didn't and Krishna knew that Jarasandha would not ask it. He got his sleeping son awakened and crowned, and proceeded to the fighting pit. Jarasandha had a fat body. Right from birth, and later because of age, and royal venality. Bhima's was a tough and hardened body, bones strong as stone. From regular and daily exercising of the body. Of course, the key factor here was age. Wouldn't seventy-year old Jarasandha have not felt exhausted even with the preliminary skirmish of holding the hands and joining of shoulders? As Krishna shouted, 'Bhima, Jarasandha seems to be tired. Be merciful', the old man felt provoked, and exerted himself to the maximum. He felt exhausted, gasping for breath. Bhima was somewhat slow in mental reflexes. He was simply engaged in showing off his technical virtuosity. Or was he showing pity for the old man? No matter how often and clearly Krishna made signs to him, Bhima didn't heed. When both Krishna and Arjuna made signs in two directions, Bhima caught the point. He tripped the old man who was breathing with difficulty, laid him low face down, and sat on his back. He put great pressure on Jarasandha's body till his breathing ceased. But Krishna later explained to me, 'Yuyudhana, Bhima did not kill Jarasandha while on his back deliberately, because that would have meant defeating the old man. Though he killed him, Bhima did not defeat him. It was because Bhima holds elders in such great respect.' That pusillanimous fellow Sahadeva just stood there, trembling for his very life. Well, why is it that sons of proud fathers turn out to be such cowards?

By the break of dawn, Jarasandha's dead body was displayed in front of the palace, and the fact was publicised. The sight of his dead body struck terror in the hearts of the citizens. The army chiefs touched the feet of Bhima and Krishna as a mark of their surrender. Didn't anybody have any sense of pride regarding their city and their country? Or did Jarasandha succeed in showing his arrogance rather than promoting any patriotism? The art of governance is a difficult one. The very day of their victory, Krishna got released the rulers imprisoned by Jarasandha to be offered in sacrifice." All of a sudden, the wind from the sea began to blow. The sweat dripping from the body cooled and gave it comfort. Yuyudhana looked round for water so that, if he could wet his chest, shoulders, back and stomach, it would feel cooler in the air. He saw a mud pot in corner, and there was a mug close by. He poured the water into the mug and then washed off the sweat. Then he drank up the water to compensate for its loss due to sweating. His mind ran towards the sea. The sea appeared to expand and contract by turns. He fixed his eyes straight on the sea, taking the whole sea in a single sweeping vision. Then Yuyudhana went back to reflection, "The Rajasuya was a ceremony which required that the rulers in the land stretching upto the sea should be either subjugated by force or persuaded peacefully to accept supremacy. If one can smash the big boulder, wouldn't it be an easy thing to dig a pond? When the news of the Pandavas killing Jarasandha spread through the Aryan world, which ruler could say no to their Rajasuya claims? From the eastern kingdom, how many cartloads of gifts and tributes did Bhima fetch, from some kings who were scared by the Pandava prowess in killing Jarasandha, and others wanting to join the bandwagon! And didn't Arjuna from the north, Sahadeva from the south and Nakula from the west, bring equal tributes and gifts?" Yuyudhana all of a sudden entertained a pessimistic thought, "Suppose Krishna had taken me and someone else, say Balarama, instead of Bhima and Arjuna, what would have happened? Was the mighty Bhima needed to tackle a seventy-year old tyrant? Well, even I would have finished that doddering old fellow. Krishna could have easily done it. In that case, the credit for demolishing the tyrant Jarasandha would have come to us, the Yadavas who had earlier fled from Mathura. Why couldn't we ourselves have celebrated the Rajasuya ritual of suzerainty? The rulers from the east, who offered tributes to Bhima would have given them to us, too. We could have made similar conquests in the north, south, and the west." As Yuyudhana peeped out of the window, he heaved a sigh at the sultriness. The body which had a short while back cooled now began to sweat again." The Yadavas were not easy to lead, not amenable to directions. Ugrasena, the doddering old wreck of a man, so weak that even with the help of two people he could hardly manage to sit on the throne, refused to give up the throne. Balarama, the elder brother of Krishna, was waiting in the

wings to succeed Ugrasena. Right from the early days, Balarama had the grouse against Krishna that he was building up his own popularity and image, which tended to undermine his claims of seniority. If Balarama became the king, then it would block Krishna in his activities, and Balarama would not hesitate to bind Krishna with the chains of his authority. But without Krishna's consent it was impossible for Balarama to ascend the throne. And equally as long as Balarama was there, Krishna himself could not occupy the throne. Of course, Krishna does not seem to have any such ambition. Krishna had never given me even the faintest hint of any such ambition. He is interested merely in getting done things he wants to get done. He didn't worry about the unpopularity arising out of some of his activities." Yuyudhana rubbed hard his back and neck to wipe out the sweat. Out there the sun had gone behind the clouds. He looked at the sky, hoping to read the signs of an immediate rain. This was repeated every day—clouds raising false hopes about a rain that never came. He lowered his eyes with a sense of despair." Well, perhaps if wasn't exactly right to say that Krishna didn't worry about formal kingship. Yes, he was interested but didn't worry about it, didn't let the mind be obsessed with it, boiling with the thought. If the time came, he would stand up to put forward his claim. Otherwise none will respect him."

Yuyudhana remembered the Sisupala episode." Yes, Yes, Krishna wouldn't hesitate to assert his authority and claim at the right time. When the virtually undefeatable Jarasandha was killed, even Sisupala was stunned. That was why he gave Bhima gifts and tributes. Moreover Sisupala had no reason to consider Pandavas as his enemies. When he arrived in Indraprastha for the Rajasuya ceremony, he saw that Krishna was behind it. He had collected there all the rulers who were hostile to Mathura and who had earlier received benefits and support from Jarasandha. When the issue of who was to be the first person to be honoured at the Rajasuya ceremony came up, Sisupala wouldn't have minded anybody receiving it. He himself was not interested in it at all. Also there was little chance of his receiving it. Jarasandha had made arrangements for his marriage with Rukmini by that time. After Sisupala had supervised and operated the expedition to raze Mathura to ground, Jarasandha had promised him Rukmini's hand. Hadn't he? How could he forgive Krishna who had deprived him of such a beautiful bride? When frustration and humiliation combine, how can one forget things? Sisupala banded his old cronies and allies and opposed the primary honour being conferred on Krishna, naturally. And his arguments were not wholly devoid of reason and justification. He had said, 'Dharmaraja, if you and Krishna are personal friends, please take him inside your palace and smother him with honours. When so many ruling heads are assembled here, what is the ground

on which you want to confer the primary honour on Krishna by devaluing the other rulers? We are all here properly crowned rulers, occupying thrones lawfully. But Krishna is not a crowned ruler. Not even a prince who is an heir to a throne. Just an ordinary Ksatriya. Doesn't your act of seating in the front this ordinary fellow and then relegating the crowned rulers to the rear seats amount to an insult to them?' How is it possible to reject this position? Of course, it is understandable that the Pandavas should want to offer the front place, out of gratitude, to one who had done so much for them. But hadn't Krishna himself desired it? Otherwise why did Krishna immediately accept the honour when it was proposed by Bhishma who knew the mind of the Pandavas but who also was grateful to Krishna who had helped the members of the Kuru lineage to perform the Rajasuya to enhance the prestige of the lineage and also for helping in the elimination of Jarasandha who had been a thorn in the flesh of the Kuru lineage? He could have protested, saying, 'I do not want it. I am too young for it/ How old was Krishna then? Thirty-five or thirty-six? Maybe he was even a year younger. He could have gracefully suggested that some elder should be accorded that honour or that it should be offered to a crowned Ksatriya. Instead he took up the challenge of Sisupala who had questioned his credentials. There had been an open fight between the two. Suppose Krishna had been killed? After all, Sisupala is no weakling." Yuyudhana stretched himself on the mattress in a relaxed posture. The eyes began to close of their own accord. He felt like sleeping again. That was always the case in summer when one felt frequently like sleeping. Well, he felt somewhat comforted by the thought that he was on the sea-shore. Then he remembered Indraprastha." We were all there at the time of the Rajasuya. What pomp and pageantry! How many people! What splendid hospitality!"Then he also remembered how Krishna occupied the position of honour after killing Sisupala and cremating him ceremonially. Balarama was right there during all this. Yuyudhana wondered whether Balarama started to feel bitter against Krishna from then on. True, Balarama had not opposed openly Krishna's choice, and had spoken no bitter word. But how could he have not been bitter? Yuyudhana felt the sleep now overpowering. He yawned twice. The question that he began to ask now was "Doesn't one who had accomplished so much so easily and who had literally set up single-handed the Rajasuya rite, deserve the honour of a front seat? Which is more important — achievement and ability or seniority? Is the status of being a crowned king really important?" Soon the questions were drowned in the powerful sleep that overtook him.

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Chapter

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SLEEP was getting lighter and lighter. Before he was fully awake he heard the foot-steps. He also heard a voice speaking. Even in his half-awake state, Yuyudhana made out that the voice was that of Nandaka. But he did not make out the second voice.

He found the accent of the second voice very funny. He failed to understand some of the words spoken by it. The second person was shouting at the top of his voice as if Nandaka was deaf. Nandaka came closer and said to Yuyudhana, "Kratu told me that you were sleeping here. Did I disturb your sleep?" Nandaka asked the other person to sit down. He squatted in the lotus-style. Yuyudhana realised immediately that the second person belonged to the Abhir tribe. He was swarthy, tall, strongly built and had a sharp jutting nose. His cheeks and eyes were also sharp. He was carrying a long stick in his hand. He had the slim and long legs of a hunting dog, and they must have made him a faster runner than a grey-hound.

Yuyudhana got up and relaxed his body. Then Nandaka said, "Look, the ancient feud between Yadavas and these people, has now resumed. He has come to explain to us who is the cause of this quarrel this time. Here, we are not sure when Krishna will return. How can we sort out things?"

Yuyudhana was fairly familiar with this conflict and its details. It seemed the Abhiras were the original inhabitants of the Anarta country. Actually, they were not living in any part of the territory, settling down to cultivate land. They did not eke out their living primarily as agriculturists, and they did not make grains and vegetables their staple food. They were nomadic cowherds. They reared hordes of cattle, and lived on the meat of old cows and oxen, cow's milk, roots and fruits. A very small group among them, however, cultivated very narrow strips of land during the rainy season, and grew and harvested wheat. They used to cook and eat this grain. They were not, like the Aryans, regular agriculturists, employing the plough and manure to enhance the crop. Even before the arrival of the Yadavas of Mathura, the land was occupied by the Aryans. As a large population from Mathura arrived to re-settle here,

the need for increased agricultural production became acute. Though earlier there was fencing of land to protect it from the wild animals of the forest, these fences were not strong enough to keep away the large hordes of cattle reared by the Abhira people. The Abhira youth were angry that the new settlers had enclosed the free pasture land where they could graze their cattle. They expressed their hostility and anger by demolishing the fences to let their cattle invade the land. There were regular and frequent battles between the Aryans with their sharp- edged metal arrows and the Abhiras with their poison-tipped bamboo arrows. Sometimes, the Yadavas became furious and killed many Abhiras. The Abhiras took their revenge by setting fire to the Yadava homes and lands during unguarded nights. Long ago, the Nagas used to inflict similar harassment on the people of Mathura. Yuyudhana recalled that his father and his generation had gone through this experience. When Krishna was very young, living in the household of a peasant in Vraja, the Nagas used to trouble them. Once Yuyudhana had asked one of the leaders from Vraja, who had arrived to Dwarka crossing the river Yamuna, "Nandaka, it seems Krishna killed a Naga when he was living in your town. What is the name of that Naga?"

Nandaka tried to recollect the name, saying, "What was his name? Let me see." He held his head between his hands. Wrinkles appeared on his face as he scratched his brain to remember the name. After a while, he spoke, "Was not it Kalia? We, too, had gone there to the place of the event. They were coming at us crossing the river. No, not every day. One odd night they came like thieves, set fire to our crops and fled. We kept vigil every night against the intruders. One day we caught them, I tell you. Not just Kalia. We finished three others as well. From that day onwards they left the forest and God knows fled in what direction. None knows." After a pause, Nandaka asked, "Why did you want to know about this?"

Yuyudhana, "Just wanted to know. No particular reason. I just remembered the incident by chance." Yuyudhana, in fact, had suddenly remembered the changes in Krishna. While in Vraja, he had shown great determination in catching and killing Kalia, and in driving out the Naga raiders. Later when the Pandavas were converting the Khandava forest into agricultural land, it was Krishna who took over the lead in organising an operation in which Arjuna and others set fire to the forest to smoke out the tribal folk and then waited with bows and arrows to shoot them as they were fleeing from the burning forest. Only after that we had the Abhiras harassing us here, wasn't it so? Occasionally Balarama and Kritavarma succeeded in teaching them a lesson or two. It was then Krishna who departed from his earlier policy of hostility towards the tribals and then brought about an amicable settlement between the Yadavas and the Abhiras. Krishna had formulated the agreement by

telling them, ‘The cultivable land now at our disposal is enough for us. If necessary, we shall intensify cultivation on them. We agree to refrain from burning any further forest to clear land for cultivation. But you must see that your cattle do not come anywhere near our fences. The wild animals chase and kill your cattle. They also rush into our lands. In hunting them, you can call on our co-operation. We shall join you in the joint hunting. The meat gained in the joint hunt will belong to you exclusively.’ How bitterly Balarama and Kritavarma opposed this settlement! Balarama did not hesitate to express his opposition even in the presence of the Abhiras, saying with sarcasm, ‘Joint hunting but the meat is only for them. And we shouldn’t burn the remaining forest land. How can the brave Aryans be scared of these cattle-raising forest folk? If you are coward enough to be scared of these tribals, you need not join our fight against them. You can sleep at home covering yourself with a blanket!’ Krishna had to explain patiently his position." They were living here before we arrived. Now they have to live, and so, too, we. We have enough cultivable land now. Since we raise such abundance of crop, we need not go for meat as food. They do not cultivate land like us. Let us not continue this futile feud." Because Vasudeva, my father, Ugrasena and other seniors had agreed with Krishna, the other two, Balarama and Kritavarma, had no option but to agree, at least for the time being. In a way, it was a good thing. The groups developed intimate and friendly relationship. During our great Indra festival, we gave them pots of milk, plenty of toddy and the meat of bison. Our hospitality included such special dishes as Prathuka, Saktu and sweet porridge, whose taste they cherished on their tongues as long as possible. Krishna personally served their women and children with milk-rice in a huge ladle. When Yuyudhana was wondering why trouble had started now between them, he remembered something suddenly. Well, in the recent Indra festivities, Krishna was not present.

Hence none from the Abhiras had been invited to the festival. Perhaps that could have been their grouse against the Yadavas. Just then the Abhira spoke, "The other day you had made an agreement with us that no new land will be cleared for cultivation by burning the forest. But now look over there." He pointed a finger at the far away hillock through the window, and said, "Your people have set fire to the forest beyond that hillock. This is now summer, and the forest is all dry. The fire has been set from your side, so that the wind may carry the flames over the whole forest. Do you think you can cultivate any land that far away from your town? The agreement was to intensify the use of the existing land, not to extend it by clearing the forest."

Yuyudhana had no knowledge of this development. When they had met the prior night, Balarama had not told him about it. Perhaps he

would have spoken about it if the graver issue of Duryodhana had not been on his mind. Yuyudhana reflected, "Maybe he might have guessed that I would have called it wrong to break the agreement Krishna had worked out." Yuyudhana was also struck by the peculiar accent and sentence structures of the Abhira. He had twisted the Sanskrit ‘tvam’ into ‘thom’, ‘agni’ into ‘agani’ and ‘ksetra’ into ‘khetra’. ‘Krisna’ had been transformed into ‘Kishna’. Yuyudhana knew that the contact with the Aryans had resulted in the Abhiras acquiring some modified version of the Aryan language. He asked, ‘What should be done now?"

"Had Kishna been here, he would have set things right. You are his friend. You counsel your people and set things right."

Another item caught Yuyudhana’s attention. He wondered whether the’Abhira visitor was shouting because he thought he was deaf! Or maybe that was his natural way of speaking. Even when Yuyudhana told him that his hearing was good and urged him to speak in a lower key, he said, "Yes "and then began to speak as loudly as before!

Nandaka explained, "You see, when these people use our Aryan language, their voice automatically rises in pitch. But when they speak their own language, the voice is more subdued and natural."

Yuyudhana kept silent, being at a loss to advise anyone. The sweat that had collected on his body so far without his noticing it, now caught his attention. While he was wiping it out with the edge of the upper garment, the Abhira sprang up like a hound and said, "The sun is declining. I must reach my folk before sundown. Shall I now take leave of you?"

Yuyudhana had yet to see what he could do under the circumstances. He asked himself, "What is the use of merely inviting the stranger home?" Then he thought that the best thing was to discuss the matter with his father first and then go to Vasudeva’s house to find some way out. The Abhira descended the steps, clutching the staff in his right hand, and then left. Yuyudhana remained silent for a while. Then he put his head out of the window and saw the visitor disappear. He said, "Nandaka, he went alone. Is it not possible that our people in the town would manhandle him?" Nandaka replied, "Of course not, people will not unnecessarily pick up a row. You see, he knows our language. Therefore, he has some good acquaintances in the town. Do you think he will go away without visiting one of them and eat at their house maize split by heating or a pancake cooked in ghee? Or something else? Whatever is available? Of course, he is not likely to visit the storeyed houses of big persons like you."

Yuyudhana felt relieved. Nandaka went to the water-pot, filled the

mug and offered it first to Yuyudhana. After that he drank the water and sat near Yuyudhana on the grass mattress. Yuyudhana did not engage him in any conversation sensing that Nandaka was absorbed in some matter. Since yesterday, his own head was getting exhausted with thinking about something or the other. However, Nandaka himself opened the conversation, "It seems the king of Hastinavati has come. It seems there is going to be a war between him and our Subhadra's in-laws. It appears that Balarama wants to commit the entire Yadava armed forces to Duryodhana's side. Is that true?"

Yuyudhana, "Well, it certainly appears to be so. Krishna should have been in town now. Never mind. Which side do you yourself think has justice?"

Nandaka, "It goes back, it seems, to the game of dice. Everybody knows that the agreement was that, after thirteen years, the territory belonging to the Pandavas should be returned to them. I remember Subhadra telling us about their enmity. But I myself think differently. It is a vice of the Ksatriya caste to gamble away, and they are just itching to fight, ready to seize any flimsy ground. Please don't get wild with me because I am faulting your caste."

Nandaka belonged to the Vaisya caste. His caste's occupation was to cultivate land and take crops out of land. The caste also engaged in cattle-rearing, carpentry including making and repairing the chariots, metal work, weaving cloth, and similar activities producing useful things.

Nandaka continued, "Do you know what I think these days? So far I used to consider Kamsa cruel and wicked. Later I was filled with fear about the consequences of Jarasandha invading and conquering Mathura. You know, Krishna and I grew together. I really used to think that his elder brother was also my elder brother. It seems that when I was three years old, my mother conceived, gave birth to a baby, which died after three months. You know when the milk in the breast is not used to feed the child, the breast begin to ache. To avoid this pain in the breast, my mother re-started to breast-feed me. The practice persisted even after mother's breast dried up, and I continued to suck her breast. If refused the breast, I would kick up a rumpus. Even now I remember it vividly. Krishna would quarrel with mother that she gave me her breast but refused him. Then she would allow both of us to suck simultaneously as mother would playfully hit us on the back and added to our pleasure. Normally I sucked the left one, and he, the right. Later Krishna, too started to plough the fields like us, tend the cattle, hunt with bow and arrows in the forest. What was the difference between us? At sixteen he became a Ksatriya because his parents' Ksatriya identity was disclosed to him when alone. From that moment he became a

different person altogether. Now I can see all this more clearly, when I remember. In those days I was an innocent, who didn't understand such things. What does it mean to say that he was a different person altogether. It meant that he was a different man? It meant that he began to devote his time mostly to wrestling and archery practice. And his face became grim as if his head carried the burdens of the whole world! All the earlier playfulness and frolicking vanished. Can you guess the reason for all this? Very simple — his efforts to live upto a Ksatriya image..."Yuyudhana interrupted, "Maybe he was worried about the plight of his parents, the real parents who had borne him."

Nandaka answered, "That is also likely. Had he not been a Ksatriya at all or had he never discovered his Ksatriya identity, Krishna would have settled down to an agricultural life. Since he is a sharp-witted person, he would have perhaps invented something new in metal-work or carpentry. In that case, he would have been happy and made others happy." Then he fell silent, unable to say anything further.

Yuyudhana got up and asked, "What is it you are saying?" The sea, through the left window, appeared to be poised for a huge crescendo. It was never easy to define and fix the form of the sea in a definitive sense; it was transforming itself all the time. Now it would swell like a round pot descending into the horizon and now it would be a flat green mattress unrolling itself endlessly and merging into darkness. When Nandaka was meditating on the form and nature of the mystery that was the sea, he lost track of the talk.

Then Nandaka continued, "The reason why I am saying this is to make the point that Kamsa, as long as he was alive, terrorised and persecuted the Yadava Ksatriyas. He never worried others. All he demanded from the others was his due as a king—the payment of one-sixth of what they produced. We were all making regular payments. What does it matter to us who rules us? The other day some relatives had come from my town. In this summer it must have been a long distance to travel. I am here a well-off person. Poor people, they had no horses, and they had to foot the whole distance. Their feet bled badly and there was blood in their urine as well. Now Vraja is without a ruler. They came to this place from Mathura, and Jarasandha had returned after destroying Mathura. If there is no ruler, at least one is spared the duty to pay one-sixth of their produce. But even then, happiness was denied them. All sorts of vagabonds and rowdies raided the place, claiming to be rulers, riding horses, too they said. They plunder us left and right. Now we have to pay twice or thrice a year. People of our town have sent us emissaries to plead that you should return, rebuild Mathura anew, and establish a peaceful rule. They feel they can be happy under your rule..."

Yuyudhana Satyaki became immediately enthusiastic about ihe idea! Nobody thought of returning to Mathura after the killing of Jarasandha. Not even Krishna. Dwaraka certainly gave them wealth. Yet why should not one branch of the Yadavas go back and settle in Mathura?, Satyaki thought. After all, it was the place of their genesis. Nandaka said, "I did discuss it with Balarama. He threw cold water on the idea by saying, 'Who wants Mathura anyway?'... Then Nandaka fell silent. Yuyudhana asked himself, "If nobody was interested in returning to Mathura, why at least I should not return to our original homeland?"

Nandaka said, "It is a Ksatriya itch to build kingdoms and then rule over them. It is also a habit. What I have been saying is simply that no natter who is the king, our activity of sowing, cultivating and harvesting remains indispensable. I don't see that it is all that important to decide whether justice lies with Duryodhana or the Pandavas. Once there is food for the belly and flower for the hair, what more do you want? They gambled. The winner refused to give the loser the stakes. Now the war, too, will take place. There will be no lack of wars as long as the Ksatriya caste survives. Well, what concern is it of ours who till the land, who wins in a war?" Yuyudhana decided to discuss the issue of returning to Mathura with Krishna after his return to town. Not merely to return but to build a city and live there. That would, of course, embroil them in disputes and wars with neighbouring kingdoms. He suddenly saw the evening invading the sky. The sea appeared to expand as the sun's red light limited the contours of the sea. Mathura had no sea. But they had a river, and Yuyudhana remembered that he had never felt the urge to view the river with love as he now did the sea.

Nandaka said, "Abhiras were happy, left to themselves. It is our people who are at fault because they offered the first provocation. To show off their bravery with bows and arrows, some of them went to the forest and set fire to it. Now, will these fellows go tomorrow to till, sow and cultivate the land, defend it against the birds and insects, in sun, rain and cold? At least you take the initiative, see Balarama and try to avert any violent confrontation between Abhiras and us. If Krishna were here, what would he have done? This Abhira had come in search of you as you are Krishna's close friend."

Yuyudhana himself felt that something had to be done. He thought that, if they waited till Krishna's arrival, before acting, the hostility between the two sides would intensify. As Yuyudhana made up his mind to prevent such an unwelcome development, Nandaka said, "I had sent the boats for repair. I must go and see what is the progress there. Tomorrow, in al 1, ten boat-loads of cargo has to be handled for export. So, please, see me day after tomorrow, as I have so many things to discuss with you."

Chapter 34

FROM there Yuyudhana proceeded to Balarama's residence. Balarama asked him in surprise, "Didn't Duryodhana meet you?"

Yuyudhana, "Where?"

Balarama, "Well, he went to your house specifically to see you. He left some twenty minutes back. Perhaps he may be discussing things with your father. Perhaps you are now coming from the seashore."

Yuyudhana was filled with surprise, but also with some sort of pride. Pride because the ruler of Hastinavati had taken the trouble to go all the way to his house to see him. But soon he realised that the visit had a selfish motive. Balarama was repeatedly touching his cheek with his left hand. Yuyudhana asked him, "How's the pain?"

Balarama answered, "It doesn't pain as badly as yesterday. But it pains enough to make me touch the jowls." Yuyudhana could now see that Balarama was drunk, maybe to kill the pain or maybe he had made the pain an excuse. But he felt more interested in going home and meeting Duryodhana. He went straight to the topic of Abhiras, and expressed his opinion on it.

Balarama asked, "Do you know why the quarrel occurs frequently?"

"Well, I told you already why. It is natural for a quarrel to break out when one of the parties to an agreement violates the terms of the agreement. Why should our people bum the forest?"

Balarama "Yuyudhana, your version is like the story of a cat catching a fever! Our Aryan women are fair, and red in complexion, it is true. Does it follow that they should not move about alone? Shouldn't they work in the fields? Should we watch helplessly and passively as they abduct our women from the fields?"

Yuyudhana was well aware that there was a substantial basis in fact to the claim that Abhiras, but not only they, but other tribes such as the Nagas, Kulindas and others, were crazy about the Aryan women and abducted them whenever they had a chance.

Yuyudhana said, "Yes, let's insist on the condition that they should refrain from molesting and abducting our women. Let us renegotiate the agreement more tightly after Krishna returns."

The very mention of Krishna's name enraged Balarama. He almost shouted, "Do you think it is possible to work out a tighter agreement regarding the women through Krishna's mediation? When he gets a chance, he does not resist the temptation to enjoy Abhira women. He claims that they are offered to him without his asking and with pleasure!"

"It is a lie, absolute lie. When he has eight wives and the wives among the women released from Narakasura, why should he run after those dark women?" , asked Yuyudhana.

"What does it matter if a woman is white or dark? A woman is a woman, so far as Krishna is concerned. Perhaps you do not fully know about Krishna. It is not at all unlikely that he may, because he himself does it, ask, why all this fuss about some of their men touching our women? Such matters are taken up seriously only by persons who attach great value to the ethical level of our people. That is not certainly true of Krishna, "replied Balarama.

Yuyudhana became furious. But he was unable to decide why and against whom! He wondered, "Is Balarama telling a lie to spoil my relations with Krishna? Or did Krishna really behave in this way?" He had married eight wives. He wedded all the women released from the clutches of Narakasura, by garlanding all of them on the sea-shore. Yet, Yuyudhana wondered, would he have extra-marital relations with non-Aryan women? Though he was a close friend, there was a gap in age between him and Krishna. He also did not forget the difference between them as a leader and follower. These two circumstances had made it difficult for him to discuss women with Krishna with frankness. He had not found it possible to raise such issue in their conversations. Given these facts, how could he believe the allegations against him? Moreover, he was reluctant to discuss about Krishna with others. Yet he had the curiosity to find out the fact.

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Chapter

35

WHEN Yuyudhana reached home, he found Duryodhana talking with his father in the front-yard. He had seen Duryodhana last, fourteen years ago at the time of the Rajasuya.. Even then he was full of royal arrogance. Now it had become magnified. He had been seated by his father to suit his royal status — on an elevated platform, covered with a soft mattress and a silk cloth. His father himself was sitting on a lower and more ordinary wooden seat. Even in this heat Duryodhana donned his crown. He was clad in silk studded with precious stones. It was a broad face, displaying the features of the people from the Gandhara country. By his side, a servant-maid was fanning. Yuyudhana touched his feet in respect because he was older. Duryodhana embraced him and held his shoulders, and made him sit by his side. But he was in a fix — how could he sit with him on an elevated seat while his own father was sitting on a lower one? Meanwhile, the servant-maid brought a wooden stool for him. After he was seated down, he asked Duryodhana, "Isn't it very hot?"

"Yes, it is very hot, indeed..."Duryodana replied and added turning to the servant-maid, "But she is fanning very vigorously."

Father, "By the way, is it hotter there than here? As for me, I have totally forgotten the climate there."

Duryodhana replied, "Yes, the heat is much more there. But here it is more sultry, making you sweat more. Moreover, here cooked food becomes spoiled and sour faster than there. And the heat..."Satyaka agreed, "Yes, yes, you can say it hundred times. Your Kuru country is very close to our Mathura."

Looking at the empty vessels near by, Yuyudhana knew that his father had already entertained the guest with dishes of honey and sweet drinks. Duryodhana opened the conversation, "Yuyudhana, among the Yadavas, next to my teacher, Balarama, you are the bravest. Your father is an ornament, not only to the Yadava clan, but to the entire Aryan world. That is why I have come to you to discuss a delicate matter of Dharma. If I am wrong, please correct me, worshipful Satyaka. Will you?" Yuyudhana looked at his father's face.

The toothless old man assured Duryodhana, "Of course, certainly, certainly." He nodded his head to emphasise his agreement.

Duryodhana spoke, "This Duryodhana may be a bundle of vices, but I can assure you that miserliness or avarice is not one of them. I should make it clear at the start that I am not speaking out of any greed for territory. The crucial issue here is that my father was born Hind. My mother is blind not by birth but by choice. Refusing to see the world because her husband could never do so, she shut off the visible world by permanently blind-folding herself. Not only in the Kuru land but in the whole of the Aryan world, my mother is worshipped as a Goddess. She is a Goddess embodying the highest ideals of husband-worship. Remember we are children of such parents, fourteen of us. Of course, it would be improper on our part to talk ill of our aunt, Kunti. After all, she, too belongs to our family. It seems she belongs originally to your Yadava clan. As far as we are concerned, this is no serious matter. Let it be. Her sons were not born to her husband. It is said that they were born through the Niyoga practice with her husband's approval. Yet, one thorny issue arises out of this. If there had to be Niyoga, why go all the way to the far-off Himalayas? Why, instead of getting done through upright Brahmins or husband's brothers, did she have it done through outsiders, that too, barbarians from the mountains? Even let that be. Niyoga is done as a rule to produce one son so that the lineage will not cease. Pandu got three children, through Kunti, one after another, and additionally the twins through his second wife through Niyoga. There was this impotent and seriously sick husband, and here was this wife producing children. Well, you draw your inference. You tell me who is the rightful heir to the Kuru lineage? True, I have come to seek your support in the war. But what is of utmost importance is not that support, but the upholding of Dharma. You decide what is the path of Dharma now, I shall accept it, whatever the decision. The Yadavas have the reputation of never abandoning the Dharma, a reputation that shall survive till the end of the sun and moon. Simply because one odd member of the Yadava clan departs from the path of Dharma, this reputation will not suffer, as far as the clan as a whole is concerned."

Suddenly the wind dropped, though Duryodhana himself enjoyed the breeze fanned by the servant-maid. But as for Yuyudhana, though he was bare-chested, sweat was streaming down profusely. As if the very body was melting. He thought it would be demeaning himself to wipe the sweat with the dhoti he was wearing in the presence of the Lord of Hastinavati, sitting opposite to him. Sitting in regal splendour, too. Also the dhoti had been used so often for that purpose that it was stinking. He simply looked upwards at the sky. The evening was gradually losing to the darkness of the night.

Duryodhana asked Satyaka politely, "It is getting time for the evening sacrificial fire-rite. Shall I leave?"

"You can do it here. But, of course, this is no palace of a crowned head."

"Uncle, this Duryodhana never makes such petty distinctions. I shall come to your house tomorrow for the morning fire-rite and also for lunch. How about it? My grandfather Bhishma advised me before I left for here that I should not miss the splendid meals at my uncle Satyaka, its dishes which even the ritual food of the great Asvamedha ritual cannot match!"told Duryodhana.

"Is that so?" The old man was inflated by the transparent flattery, and to make further sure of it, he asked, "How did the great Bhishma know about the taste of our food?"

Duryodhana brushed aside the question with a broad answer, "What can be there that revered Bhishma does not know?" But even such a weak answer was good enough for Satyaka. He said to Duryodhana, "You must come tomorrow. I shall send Yuyudhana to bring you here. Now, Yuyudhana, take the great king to Balarama's palace."

That night Yuyudhana slept somewhat early. Inside, father was discussing the next day's menu with his daughter-in-law and the male cook. He was ordering a servant to go and fetch a young bull to be slaughtered in honour of the royal guest. The old man was repeating himself. Though his father's loud words were physically splitting his ears, Yuyudhana's mind was elsewhere. He thought, "It was sixteen years since the Pandavas had performed the Rajasuya." He, too, had gone to it. He remembered that many people were discussing Gandhari's sacrifice at that time. They were saying that she was an incarnation of the essence of the Arya Dharma. She renounced her gift of sight because she refused to enjoy what was denied to her husband. But he did not see her and call on the great lady. For the simple reason that Dhritarashtra did not turn up for the Rajasuya. It seemed that right from his birth he had never ventured to go beyond the boundary of the city of his birth. Well, even if he had come, what could he have seen with his blind eyes? He had to rely on other witnesses' report. He said he would prefer to hear it in his own place. And then how could that great husband - devotee come when her husband could not? At that time itself he had a desire to take a reverential look at that great woman. His father was saying repeatedly, "Such a modest and unassuming man, though such a great king. It is our good fortune that he agreed graciously to eat with us." There was plenty of breeze, though it was a warmish wind that blew. Sleep was creeping in, but the wind produced heat. As Yuyudhana relaxed his body and turned to the other side, he thought

Duryodhana was right. Duryodhana had said "We were born to our own father. Pandavas were born to an alien seed other than their real father's. Therefore, justice is on our side." Yuyudhana felt that it was not easy to fault this argument. At the same time, he was not prepared to accept it fully. Like Krishna, Arjuna was also his friend. He had helped Arjuna in the matter of his marriage with Subhadra. Yuyudhana reflected, "Subhadra has been like a sister to me for the last thirteen years, spending most of her time from morning on in our house... I coached Abhimanyu in archery so much that he can claim me as his teacher. Niyoga practice cannot be against Dharma. After all, it is left to a husband to want one or three..."He recalled with a jolt that he himself had held the implanting of a foreign seed to be a sin. Wasn't it because Kamsa was born of the alien seed of. Drumila that he oppressed the entire Yadava clan? An alien seed is like a crow's egg in a nest of nightingales. Then did it follow that the Pandavas were born to destroy the Kuru lineage? But in all this, what was crucial was the principle of justice. He further reflected, "Not only justice but Dharma. Other factors like our marrying Subhadra to a Pandava or our personal relationships of friendship and love must be ignored and discounted in arriving at a decision based on Dharma..." Immediately he felt the urge to quench his thirst. Unwilling to shout for the servant-maid to fetch water as it would have interrupted his train of thought, he got up himself, went to the huge pot of water placed in the front-yard, poured water into a container and then quickly gulped it. He returned to the grass mattress. He heard them discussing the Karambhaka dish inside. He reflected again, "But the Pandavas had not shown disrespect to any elders of the Kuru lineage. In fact, they shower the seniors with more respect than Duryodhana. They do not have the cruelty of a Kamsa. Dharmaraja's so-called authoritarian rule was, in fact, so mild that there was no voice of opposition.." As he was yawning and rolling on the bed, Yuyudhana wondered about the reasons why Ugrasena discriminated against Kamsa, a question planted in his mind first by the old woman Chitra. This thought got mixed up with the memory of Krishna's accepting the children born of different seeds to the women liberated by him from Narakasura, as his own children. He recalled that Krishna had gently touched the head of one of them and named him Kratu. In short, Yuyudhana was thrown into a mental and moral turmoil. Kamsa derived his cruelty because of being born to an alien seed. Krishna who accepted children born of other seeds as his own, had killed Kamsa. Children were born to Goddess Gandhari through her blind husband. Pandavas were lx)m to alien seeds, through Niyoga. Krishna had actively taken their side. However hard he tried, he found it impossible to weigh the claims of the Pandavas and Kauravas in the scale of Dharma. The pans refused to balance in his mind. He was haunted by Chitra's question, "Why did Ugrasena discriminate against the tender baby Kamsa?" This

Dwaraka, he thought, did not have great Vedic scholars who could throw light on such complicated issues. He got angry with Krishna. He said he was going to Virata city, but he has holed up there. Why is he not here at this crucial juncture?" Yuyudhana made up his mind not to support the Pandavas until Krishna clarified the issues and settled his doubts. He would say he had nothing to do with the war. Gradually sleep sucked him into its depths.

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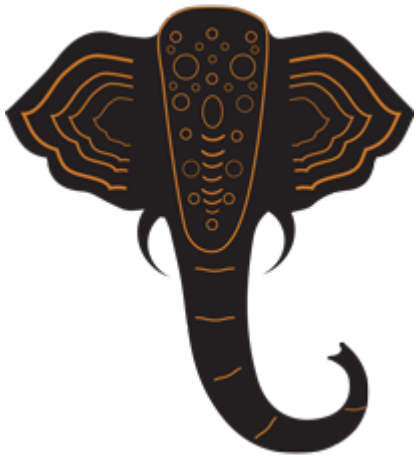
PART SEVEN



Chapter 36

"REALLY, I left too soon "Karna said to himself. The dog followed him quietly. Or was it because he had not exercised his body, and thus time was saved. But how much time could have been saved? He asked himself, "After all, in this old age, how much time would I have spent in exercising the body? I am sixty-five." For the first time in his life Karna felt the old age creeping over him. He felt no particular regret at it. No pride either. A sense of more depression. A mood of low enthusiasm and excitement. Karna reminisced, 'In this darkness, I cannot see the boat. For so many years, no, for decades, the boat had arrived unfailingly. The sky looks ashen. I started out only after hearing the cock crow. Perhaps, like me the cock also couldn't sleep in the night! One marks time by hearing the cock only if the mind is otherwise caught up in a directionless confusion." As he lifted his head, he saw the river-bank. Excepting for the wide bathing spot, on either bank of the river stood dense, three-men high wild grass and plants." Well, these can be seen even in pitch dark night." Then Karna lifted his face towards the sky again. He felt as if ash was falling from the sky and covering his face. He knew it was an illusion and felt like laughing when he remembered that it was on an evening that resembled the light of a dying lamp, that he had met Krishna. Was it the darkness of the evening or the darkness of the night?" I had never seen Krishna from close quarters. After I had just passed beyond this very bank, he had said, 'Karna, tie up the reins, get up from your charioteer's position and come here. I have something to discuss with you.' He bent down and touched my feet, and said, 'Don't be afraid. You are fourteen years older than me. You are my aunt's eldest son.' Illusion. The sky may look ashen but how can it rain ash? Good Lord, just missing one night's sleep should produce all this. I washed my face as the water murmured. He explained, 'Don't you know that Kunti is my aunt? You are her eldest son.' Why did I unnecessarily wash my face? On the bank, the dog lying on the sand whimpered. Perhaps it was wondering why I had come so early and in this darkness. I could only see indistinctly the dog lying down and watching me. In the mornings, when I went to the river, it never fell behind me. I felt like going to it and fondling it. Krishna continued, T, too, didn't know it. It was during the Rajasuya that I could see you at

closer quarters. As soon as I saw your face, I was struck by its resemblence to Kunti's face — the same wide eyes, forehead, face and even the shape of teeth. I was suddenly seized by a suspicion. After leaving there, I made enquiries at Kuntibhoja's palace. Yesterday night, I asked your mother Kunti. She confirmed my suspicion' The day had not yet broken. In the dark waters, one cannot see one's image. I walked back and held the dog by its scruff. I sat down. The tail began to wag affectionately, of its own accord. This has been ever since we had brought it as a pup. Even if I left town for a day, it would refuse food and lie down lowering its tongue. I embraced it. Making loving noise it licked my body. Krishna said further, 'Karna, I do not want to force you to do anything. You think for yourself. You are the one to act. If you say, yes, I shall relay the news to the Pandavas. They, of course, will come and touch your feet in respect. Duryodhana is your friend anyway.' It nestled between my knees and slept warmly. I too felt like sleeping. But I was absolutely certain that sleep was beyond my reach at that moment. The whole night I had tossed on the bed, unable to sleep. How could it come then? All my limbs, the whole body, ached acutely. I yawned. Just sat closing my eyes. I began to doze. Disengaging the dog, I lay down on the sand, stretching my body and limbs. Sleep came from somewhere within. I did not dream straight dreams — only fragments of dreams, splintered images, disconnected pictures. They were a jumble, no sequence, no pattern, no interconnection. There lay the water of the river, silent, motionless and black. The river's water turned into waves of pictures, which flooded over me and choked my breath. Suddenly scared, I got up and sat down. The dog came to me and sniffed me. What river was it? I have always been having dreams about rivers. Right from the time I could understand such things. In early years, more frequently and in later years, less so. As I married, begot children and then grandchildren, these dreams had almost ceased, maybe I had then once or twice. In the last eight to ten years, not even once. It was a dream in which the water rose in a tide, overwhelmed me and choked my breath. In the beginning, if I had not shaken the shoulders of my wife by my side whenever I had this dream, I am not sure what the fear would have produced in me! It was a strange dream that disturbed my sleep again and again. It was like some sin from my past life returning to haunt me. When I asked Duryodhana if he had such dreams, he said, 'Never.' The king felt that the dreams were due to the work of some evil forces. He arranged for me a ritual to ward off the evil. After the ritual, I had no dreams for two months. But later again I had them, to torment me,dreams of water flooding over me and swallowing me. Terrifying black waters.

"The dog stood up. It shook its body as its ears vibrated. I had no mind to bathe. But how could I return home, without bathing and worshipping the sun God? This was something I had never done. I

couldn't see the stars. The only sign of morning was the cock's crow. It had crowed out of turn, prematurely perhaps. Why did mother tell me a lie? I wanted to ask her but she was not there. Father too was not there. The neighbours couldn't believe that the child was born from her belly. Was she a barren woman who could bear no children? Or was father an impotent person who could not produce children? Both must be false allegations. How can she, so full of love, be barren? I remember when I was seven or eight years old, mother would embrace me, saying how sweet to taste I was, and she enjoyed biting my cheeks. Father used to say, 'It is not enough to make bows like me, but you must learn to aim and shoot arrows accurately/ It was his wish that I should rise above the status of a mere charioteer — I who had Ksatriya blood without attaining a fully Ksatriya status, one who made bows but could not aspire to be an archer, one who designed chariots but did not become its master. He advised me, 'Child, I have spent all my life as a charioteer of King Dhritarashtra. You should never become anybody else's charioteer.' The daylight was fractionally breaking. The dense foliage fringing the two banks began to be more visible. Looking back at the water, I saw floating drift-wood, bits of planks, bamboo bent for making bows, and material for making the rope — all put into water for seasoning. I then saw how appropriate was the ti tie, Sütaghatta or the bank of the charioteers, for this stretch of the bank. I had never thought of this» About a thousand steps away was the Ksatriyaghatta, and by its side, the Brahmanaghatta. A ghatta was the spot where one could bathe and wash one's clothes. It was the spot where water was made available for carrying out occupational activities of our castes. Even now the scene is vivid in my memory. The water near the Sütaghatta was filled with material needed to construct the chariots. When the Pandavas were sighted in the Virata city, war had become inevitable, giving the charioteers plenty of work round the clock. On moonlight days, we had to work in the night too. Well, the day was breaking now decisively. Yet it was not yet time for bathing. Soon after the bath, I had to turn eastward to take a ritual and reverential look at the rising sun. I became silent for a while. I wanted to ask her, but she wasn't there. Father, too, was not there. What was there to ask when things had become so clear? Or was Krishna lying in order to create a breach between me and my king? It is not unlikely that an unwanted child should be abandoned in a boat to drift away. It seems father and mother hailed from the native town of Kunti. After they had spent a night, in the morning they were offering prayers to the sun on a river bank. Then they found me in the boat floating quietly into their vision, a baby all smiles. My smile spread in all directions its light like the sun, in seven circles. Father pointed to me, saying, 'Look there; here I was praying to the sun God that he grant us a child. It was as if God has sent us this gift. Here, hold the boat.' He was stunned at the mystery of God. Staring at me unbelieving and yet

believing. As the boat appeared to move away from them, it seems mother shouted, ‘My baby’ and swam after it. Father waking up jumped into the water and towed the boat to the bank. Mother was overflowing wi th joy, ejaculating, ‘Tender baby, lovely baby.’ She addressed the baby, that is me, ‘Child, you are a gift from the Sun God Himself to us. Look there, just as a potter makes a doll out of earth, the Sun God created you out of a portion of his brightness, putting you in the boat of his rays, and sent you to me. After all, isn’t He the presiding deity of the charioteers?’ As mother said these words, my mind would expand to reach the world of the sun. What bliss! What dream mother created and planted in my tender mind! As I grew in the knowledge that the birth of a baby was a natural event, and learnt that I was born to a womb other than that of this mother, a child born to a heartless woman who had abandoned me to an uncertain fate, I became sad. And there was also a sense of great loss that I was born, after all, like others to a woman, and not specially created by the Sun God out of His own blinding light. But as I grew up, mastering archery and became King Duryodhana’s right hand, regarded as one of the precious stones studding his dazzling crown, I secretly began to believe that I was fashioned out of sun-light, and at the same time I was happy to enjoy the full love and affection of my mother Radha as her divinely-given son. Whenever I stood before the just rising sun and prayed to Him, my devotion blossomed under the sun’s rays. After returning home, how often I would embrace mother, now an old woman, with love and lift her to the soft mattress! Damn Krishna! He destroyed all that, deprived me of my claim to be sun’s fragment, and turned me into a baby that fell out of the womb of that wretched Kunti!"At this point, Karna felt his eyes closing automatically. Not from sleep, though. Darkness within. He sat motionless for a while. Then suddenly stood up as if to break out of a trance. He removed his dhoti, upper garment, and armour, stripping himself to the bare loin-cloth. As he descended into the water, more light fell from the sky. As usual, he dipped in the water upto his waist and stood there. He did not want to wash himself with his hands and thus disturb the water. Though winter had not fully set in, the river Ganga was quite cold, having made just one night’s journey from its Himalayan home. In the still and silent water, he saw the reflection of his body, shoulders, arms and face. One did not need to go by Krishna’s description to get an idea of his physique. His were wide shoulders and broad chest. Wide face. Large white-pupilled eyes. Forehead as wide as six fingers. Karna thought, "I have never seen that Kunti properly. It seems she has been living right here in Vidura’s house Some distance from this Sütaghatta, beyond the clump of Sütangi water grass; she is supposed to sit on the bank near Vidura’s house. I had refused to look at her out of contempt because she was the mother of the Pandavas. I have to imagine her body build and appearance from Krishna’s description. Yes, he had said,

‘Karna, you are the only one among her children to take on a strong likeness to her. Dharma, Bhima and Arjuna resemble their Niyoga fathers from the Deva land. Your complexion, too, is like hers.’..."Karna hit the mirror-smooth surface of the water, rippling it. Then he plunged into the shapeless dark water to swim. It was the spot where daily he swam from bank to bank. Now for the first time, he felt exhausted as he reached the mid-point. Not only that. He also felt the pull of the powerful currents deep down the placid water. He thought that, if he did not generate counter-movement, the under-currents would carry him away. His limbs began to shake as if out of fear. He began to hit the water with his hands and legs with force. This was the first time that he was swimming with such noise and effort, fie felt ashamed of his swimming when he remembered his advice to his children and grand-children, "You must swim straight, without making noise, as if you are an expert archer ready to shoot an arrow." The dog barked angrily on the bank, imagining that its master was grappling with an enemy in the water! Then it jumped into the water as if to help him. Karna knew that if the animal came under the control of the under-current, it would be difficult to save it. Suddenly, changing his direction, he swam back to the bank. He reached the shivering dog to the bank. Then as he stood in the waist-deep water, the muddy floor beneath his feet dissolved gradually, depriving him of support. He remembered that he had never stood in the water dis-oriented like this. By that time, the sun was visible. The parts of his body beneath the water looked stunted. It was time for the chanting of prayer in praise of the sun. Out of force of habit, his hands joined in a praying posture. The eyes automatically half-closed. The tongue began to say the prayer automatically. For the Brahmins, the sacred fire was the medium of worship. For the Ksatriyas, it was necessary to hire a Brahmin priest for money to perform the rite on a big scale. The members of the Süta or charioteer caste were denied both these options. Karna fumbled in his recitation of the prayer for the first time in the last fifty years. The sun was the only God who was directly visible to the eyes every day without fail. His father used to tell Karna that it was the duty of the Süta community to function as charioteers for sun’s seven-horsed chariot. Finding it difficult to recite correctly the words which were part of the daily sun-worship, Karna closed his eyes with difficulty and tried to focus on the right words, with mental concentration. Though he got Brahmin priests to perform many rites in his palatial residence, it was here on the rising sun that Karna’s devotion was concentrated. He was a genuine devotee of the sun God. He wondered whether the centre of his devotion was dislocated like the upsetting of the stillness of the water when a pebble dropped into it! Or perhaps the piercing rays of the sun or the smooth skin of the water turning from red to white and the dazzle of the sun on the Jondu leaves, disrupted his ritual devotion.

Just this once, just this one day. Mechanically he repeated the prayer, offered water in his scooped palm thrice to the sun, and the returned to the bank.

The dog wagged its tail and then, lowering its neck, stood near him, ready to obey his orders. As he dried himself, put on the garments and armour-plate, and came away from the bank. he saw twenty to thirty persons waiting for him. He recognised them as his own people. They belonged to his caste. They had come to the bathing spot. When he was there, they wouldn't go near the bank, as they held him in such high respect. They did not even sit down. They just stood there, waiting for him. Karna stood still for a moment. Then he gave them a sweeping look, as if he was acknowledging their tribute. Simhaka, a famed designer and builder of chariots, came closer, respectfully touched the ground and saluted him. Karna enquired of Simhaka, "Have you arrived so soon for work?"

"There is so much work. It has to be done."

"Only so few?"

"Great one, there is a rumour among our people that the war will not take place."

"Who told you this?"

"It seems Vidura said so. It seems an emissary has arrived from the Pandavas to negotiate peace. They even mentioned his name." Then he asked one of his friends, Chaitya, for the name.

Chaitya, a fifty-year old caste leader was waiting to be called. He came forward, touched the ground, and saluted Karna. Then he spoke, "He is said to be a relation of the Pandavas. They said his name was something I have forgotten. If true, your honour will certainly know it."

Karna did not spell out Krishna's name. He recalled that the previous evening, Krishna had said, holding his hand, that he was there to work out a genuine peace. Karna asked himself, "If he really wanted peace why was he interested in creating rift in the enemy's camp? He threw my mind into a confusion by telling a tale about my birth and upset my ritual devotion to the Sun-God. Was he planning to confuse our people and disrupt our preparations by spreading the false rumour of a peace?"

Chaitya continued, "My elder brother visited Vidura. One thing led to another and my brother happened to inform Vidura that the Süta community had assumed the responsibility for producing a hundred chariots. Thereupon, Vidura commented, 'Fool, there will be no war. When there is no war, how can the palace people buy your chariots? If tomorrow they say they do not want the chariots, what will you

do? Ordinary chariots will be bought, but who will purchase these war chariots without a war? ..."

Krishna was camping with Vidura. Karna reviewed the situation, "As I wouldn't go there, Krishna came himself to my house yesterday evening. He invited me to accompany him in the chariot for a short trip. He had said, 'Let there be no charioteer, we shall jointly drive the chariot. Was it because he was the guest or because he was a Ksatriya and I a Süta that I drove it? Did Vidura, Krishna and Kunti jointly concoct the false story about my birth and parentage?"

Simhaka asked, "Can we believe Vidura, great king?"

Karna was unable to give a straight answer. For the entire Süta community, he and Vidura were the two most prominent leaders. Yet they never saw eye to eye. Vidura was born to a servant-maid of Dhritarashtra's Mother. He was the same Dhritarashtra's charioteer's son, son of Adhiratha. Vidura lacked the qualities of a warrior and Karna had been promoted for those qualities, to the status of an army commander. Vidura was yet accorded a place in the court. He used to advise Duryodhana occasionally from the point of view of the Pandavas, and was roundly condemned for it. He had earned the title of Dharmatma or the Soul of Dharma, from Bhishma. People had come to believe that Vidura could never tell a lie. Yet how could he say "yes" to Simhaka's question? Karna reassured himself, "No matter what their strategies, I know my master Duryodhana's mind. And who knows it better?"

Karna answered, 'it is all lies. The war is a certainty."

Chaiya pleaded, "Please, great king, see that the war occurs. Or else how can we, who live by making war equipment, survive?"

Karna walked further. The others followed him at a distance out of respect. The dog also followed. The sun was already sharp. He decided that he should hurry home, finish his meal and get ready for work. It was possible that the court might assemble to listen to Krishna's message and peace offer. Or Duryodhana might send for him. He quickened his steps. On the way, he yawned once. As one entered the city, crossing the fort, there was first the zone where the cultivators lived, and immediately next to it was the zone of the Süta households. In the midst of the Süta colony stood Karna's own palatial house. It was specially built for him under Duryodhana's personal supervision. The dog halted at the door. Karna went in. In the lane behind the house, there was some row going on. He could make out that his wife was involved, through her voice. He was wondering what was its cause, when the commotion stopped abruptly. He concluded that the knowledge of his arrival must have terminated the verbal exchange. His old regret at having married too

many wives returned. His anger against Duryodhana revived. It was he who had induced him to acquire so many wives. He had advised Karna, 'Look, Karna, you are a close friend of the king. Your status requires more than one wife. You must have at least four or five.' He was a Ksatriya accustomed to receiving a crowd of servant-maids as part of dowry. When a person like Karna wanted, there was no lack of brides. Karna playfully cursed Duryodhan, saying to himself, 'The great king has taught me all the Ksatriya vices.' It made him feel better to curse his king and master. Karna enquired, "Where are the children?" The servant-maid waiting near the door came before him, and, bowing, said, "Shatrunjaya and Vipata have gone out to practise archery with their children. It seems Druma, Vrikaratha and Satyasena have gone to look after the army horses. Chitrasena and Susharma are preparing the traps for their hunting trip. Sushena is in the kitchen. Saying, "All right", Karna sat down on the soft seat. The dog was sleeping resting its head against the threshold. Its reddish body glistened because of the recent wash in the river. Behind the main mansion of Karna, there were smaller houses in a row. The sons lived in separate units with their families, and all of them were employed by the army to do different skilled jobs. Yet they all accepted Karna's wish that the entire joint family should eat together in Karna's main mansion. Karna enjoyed his meal when his little grandchildren sat round him. He never ate with his wives, whom he had married only to show off his status!

After some time, his son Sushena called him for lunch. He was the son of Karna's first wife, Gunakeli, who was dead. After her death, it became Sushena's responsibility to look after his father's feeding. He also looked after his father's personal needs. He gave regular company to his father during the meals. Karna washed his feet and hands, and then proceeded to the big covered yard at the back of the house. Twenty wooden planks for sitting had been arranged in two rows opposite each other. Food itself was served in plates carved out of wood. Soon Karna's eighteen grandchildren rushed to him, competing to sit near their grandfather. He talked to each one of them, and seated them. He sat his son, Sushena. The noise of the children subsided as the plates were filled with such delicious items as cooked rice, mutton and cow's milk. While chewing the meat pieces, Karna was full of thoughts about Krishna. He had learnt that Krishna had got Jarasandha killed through trickery. Karna was aware that Krishna was adept at fathoming human character and motivation. He felt that he had wasted the whole night sleeplessly, thinking about things. He thought he would make up for it by taking a good nap after the meal. The last boy in the opposite row-who was it? Yes, Druma's third child, Vishwajit, began to cry. The one next to him, Vikaratha's eldest child, was a mischievous and high-spirited lass. The boy cried because she had thrust her hand into his plate and

filched a morsel! Karna couldn't control his laughter. He admonished the girl, "Look here. Never put your hands, into other people's plate." Karna remembered his own mother, Radha, who had died only six years ago. But the other mother or so-called mother, Kunti, had been living those thirteen years, in Vidura's house. Didn't she know that he was her son? Why didn't she, even once, contact her mother's friend and through her, identify him and talk to him? Or was it all a tissue of lies, fabricated by wily Krishna? He remembered that his mother was enormously fond of children. He recalled that when he got angry with his sons, Shatrunjaya, Vipata and Druma, and tried to beat them, she would rush to the children, embrace them and pull away my hand from them. Karna sighed, "How nice it would have been if my face had resembled hers rather than this Kunti's?" He recalled that hers was a longish face, and she had a short forehead. Once again he yawned. But his mind told him that sleep was not going to grace him.

He said, "Sushena, did you feed the dog?" The son did not answer. Karna understood, got up,carrying his plate to the outer yard and poured its contents to the dog. Then he returned with his plate to continue his meal. The cook re-filled the plate with the dishes.

Sushena asked his father, "Father, you had a sleepless night. You were walking up to the door for no reason and opening it, not once but several times. Why was that?" Karna looked at his son’s face. Sushena added, "Look, father, even now your eyes are red for lack of sleep, and your cheeks look hollow."

Karna answered, "Sleep didn’t come." Then he began to push food into his mouth.

"Yesterday evening, you went alone in the chariot with that emissary of the Pandavas, Krishna, for such a long distance. It was dark. It was very late when you returned. What made you risk going with an enemy alone like that ", the son asked.

"What’s wrong with it?"

"After your return, you did not eat. You didn’t sleep even a wink the whole night. Did any conversation take place that upset you? Or was there any poisoning?"

"I ate nothing, drank nothing."

"Can one be poisoned only through food or drink? In the darkness, one can gently pierce a poison-tipped thorn to produce enough effect. We use the Naga arrow by tipping it with poison. Like that."

"No. Nothing of the sort was there."

Sushena was silent. Karna found it difficult to negotiate the food

already in his mouth. No matter how hard he tried to push it down with his tongue, the food refused to godown. To a void being noticed by his son, he hurriedly gulped the food. But what was left in the plate, remained untouched.

After finishing the ritual of eating, he chatted briefly with all the grand-children, fondled their cheeks, kissed them, and then retired to his bed. He stretched himself on the mattress, covered with a thick woollen blanket. The eyes closed of their own accord. Mother Radha's slim body. Father Adhiratha's emaciated frame, more bones than flesh. His square face. His father had said, "Child, I became a charioteer. But you must have a better deal. You must be the warrior in the chariot. I shall teach you whatever little archery I happen to possess. We can start off right away." Now the best preceptor of archery in Hastinavati was Kripacharya. There were no princes interested in learning archery. Karna thought, "Duryodhana is twelve years my junior. And Dharmaraja, ten years. I was told, This Kripa does not know much. Whatever he imparts is not enough. You better go out to a good Guru, serve him diligently and learn at his feet.' Mother was afraid of letting me go, to wander in search of an unknown Guru. Not so much fear as affection and love that could not brook separation from me, 'Are we Ksatriyas to insist on learning from a regular Guru? No, no, you shouldn't go, I was then eighteen but too tall for my age. I had a big build, and my mother's head did not even come up to the level of my neck, when we stood together. Her longish face stands before me often. I was a fortunate one indeed. She was alive to see her son turn sixty. During the last days of her life, like the other members of my community, she, too, began to address me as Maharaja. She wouldn't listen to me when I asked her to address me not as a Maharaja but as a child. In what sense did she call me a Maharaja, I didn't know! Maybe because of her awareness that I was, after all, a Ksatriya child! She died with the secret of my birth buried in her belly. She died wrapping her love around the truth about my birth. Didn't she feel any regard for Kunti who had come to live in this town, as her old mistress? Or did she prefer to keep away from a possible scandal, scared and silent? How long did Kunti stay in this town after arriving here ceremoniously as Pandu's bride? Even at that time, didn't she visit Kunti? She didn't see Kunti. Or perhaps she did call on her, to be received coldly and then told, 'Radha, you should never again see me.' I wonder whether Kunti cared to ask about the whereabouts and welfare of her first child. It seems Kunti had lived childless with an impotent husband. Who knows the truth? And mother swallowed it and died keeping it safe in her stomach. Perhaps Kunti had no idea of mother marrying someone in this town. Well, I knew mother's mind well. There is no way I can understand Kunti's mind. Already at that time, the practice had grown among the Ksatriyas in those parts to condemn the birth

of children out of wedlock as something to be ashamed of, something nauseating. Now even the Ksatriyas in these parts have begun to adopt that practice. How strange these changing Ksatriya fads look. The daughters of Duryodhana and Dussasana were strictly forbidden to have relations with men outside. Our Sütas have not yet started to imitate the Ksatriyas in this regard. If they did, then where would the unmarried, budding girls come from to gratify the Ksatriya male craving?" Suddenly it flashed in Karna's mind. He remembered how as adolescents he and Duryodhana used to enjoy servant-maids during their jaunts! Quite a few of them were from the Süta community. The thought made Karna blush. They were women of his community and caste. He and Duryodhana had compared notes about their sexual exploits. Karna still indulged in this practice. He was fifty-three. The Ksatriya women followed the cult of chastity of the girdle, the purity of the womb. His mind was playing with his memory, all sorts of games. Some of the items which were now focussed by his memory, had never earlier been recalled by his memory. He wondered, "Why only now?" He yawned. He hoped, "Maybe the court has not met today." His body needed sleep very badly, at least a little of it. As he stretched his body and lay down face upward, closing his eyes, he found himself drawn into a deep sleep. The mind which was caught up in a whirlpool, had become a pitcher, descending into a bottomless well. Like the pitcher,he was warm within,but after how long,may be eternity or a few moments it filled itself with the dark water. The dark water turned into a flood engulfing everything around. He got scared and abruptly woke up. This was the terrifying dream that tormented him like an evil spirit, waiting, crouching to destroy his sleep. He turned to the other side, utterly at a loss to find a way of tackling this dream. Again, he plunged into the world of memory, "The small boat drifted from the middle of the full river. The eyes were burning with pain. A yawn so deep that it nearly dislocated the cheek-bones. In the front-yard of the house, the commotion and noise of children. What games were they playing in the hot sun? Who said, T shall shoot the arrow. I shall take the ball out of the well through my arrow.' Was it Satyasena's son Vishwajit? Perhaps. Yes, It was his voice. I had taught the children. But Bhishma had laid down the law that non-Ksatriyas should not be taught the more subtle skills of archery. Hence, I was never fully admitted into Drona's school. I could be strictly taught enough to enable me to do the job of a servant or an assistant to the charioteer. Father had said, 'Child, these Ksatriyas are like that, totally selfish. Have you heard of the name of Parashurama? He lived in the remote past. He broke the back of the Ksatriyas, destroying them on a large scale. He belonged to the Bhargava lineage. There are still Brahmins of this lineage around. Go to them. They have vowed never to teach a Ksatriya. We are not Ksatriyas any way. Tell them you are not a Ksatriyas, serve them with total devotion, work

hard, and learn all that they can teach. I know of no one with arms as long as yours, arms ideally suited for the art of archery. Father was obsessed with the idea that his son should become a master of archery! Wasn't I any less ambitious? How can one use the flaming arrow without mastering general archery? My teacher Bhargava taught me with such dedication! It was at very vigorous training, taught well and systematically only when the disciple himself demanded it from me. It was a tougher regime than Drona's. Drona showed great commitment. Or else he simply taught a few routine tricks which pleased easy-going royal youth. With Bhargava, there was no half-way, no relaxation from single-minded devotion. He told me when I first went to him, 'Child Vasushena, your arms and shoulders and wide chest, are all potential equipment for a master archer. The material for an outstanding warrior. Unfortunately you have come to me some six or seven years late. One cannot learn as well or as much as one can at this age as at a tender age. Yet, do not lose hope. Study with total concentration.' I would have completed my training with him, had I not committed the most serious blunder of my life. If only I had the firmness of mind not to spill out a secret! I was inwardly most happy because I had learnt the art. But within me, there rose a fierce heat due to my desperate efforts to keep secure the secret that I, Süta, had told my Guru the lie that I was a Brahmin in order to benefit from his teaching. One must learn to keep secrets, swallow them, like my parents whose secrets died with them. May be they did talk about it when alone. Perhaps! I regarded Bhaga as a genuine friend. But he ditched me by his treachery. No, it was not treachery or cheating. He felt he had got hold of a secret. Unable to keep it to himself, he blurted it out. Why blame others? The fault was fully mine. The Guru asked me, 'Vasushena, why did you lie about your caste?"

My legs and hands began to tremble and my whole body soaked with sweat. I answered, 'Revered Preceptor, I did not lie in order to deceive you. My motive was simply my passionate desire to learn. Because I had learnt that you wouldn't instruct any person who is not a Brahmin....

Guru, 'No. Our rule is simply never to teach a Ksatriya.'

His explanation gave me some courage and my hope blossomed again. I answered, 'I am not a Ksatriya.'

Guru, 'But you are a Süta. It is a community born from the Ksatriya seeds sown in the wombs of women of the farming caste. It is a fast growing breed. The seed is guided by the principle of procreation. In any case, Sütas live in the service of the Ksatriyas. Therefore, I shall not teach you now. Go away.' "

Karna suddenly woke up. Though there was no sultriness, he

began to soak in sweat. He realised that Bhargava's statement that Sütas were loyal servants of the Ksatriyas. turned out to be true in his case. His life was no secret to him. He was not particularly dissatisfied with it either. Yet the memory of the past now returned to torment him. Not just memory. Some understanding also. A new awareness of certain things. He now realised that the seed determined the nature of the fruit. The great sage Bharadwaja begot an issue of a potter woman, and he accepted Dronacharya as his son. Not the mother but the father defined the identity of the off-spring. Saradwanta of yore produced Kripa and Kripi through a tribal woman, but he accepted them as his own, and made them Brahmins. The distinguished sage Parasara got the dark child, Krishna Dvaipayana, through a fisher-woman, and the son became one of the greatest experts in Vedic lore. Yes, the seed defines the fruit. Then Karna asked himself, 'If this is so, then why didn't the Ksatriyas not accept as Ksatriya the children they produced through the woman of the cultivator community, but set them apart as a separate and inferior caste, called the Sütas? Why didn't they accept their children as their own? And the caste thus sprung up to serve the Ksatriyas multiplied very fast. One person, Dhritarashtra, had procreated eighty-six Sütas'. Then how many did Duryodhana, Dussasana and the other thirteen brothers produce? If you count all the Sütas produced by the kings in the Aryavarta as a whole, how many thousands would it be? Ten times or hundred times the number of Ksatriyas? The population of the cultivators has been growing faster than that of the Ksatriyas..." He yawned but sleep didn't come. Then he shouted for the servant-maid and asked her to fetch water. The sweet water of the river was nice to taste. He felt cold all over the body. He sat alone in the dark room fora while, and the mind was arrest, no longer churning the memory. In the front hall, flies were buzzing loudly. Karna thought it was good to have the mind passive, not getting embroiled in the past or the present. For the first time since the previous evening, Karna found some peace of mind. He wondered why the mind escaped control and danced as it pleased. And it became quiescent, when it pleased it. The puzzlement about the mysteries of the mind didn't upset his tranquillity. Even the flies suddenly became silent after a frenzy of buzzing. Then again they would re-start on a different tune. When this was going on, the servant-maid peeped into the room. Karna turned his head in her direction.

She reported, "The chariot has arrived from the palace."

Karna stood up and went out. He saw at the door Duryodhana's most favourite and intimate charioteer, Sunama. As soon as he saw Karna, Sunama bowed and said, "I have been ordered to take you immediately." It was Duryodhana's practice to fetch Karna in his own chariot when urgency required that the time spent in Karna's own

chariot being made ready had to be cut down. Hence, Karna inferred that the call must be for some crucial consultation. The charioteer added, "There will also be a meeting of the court." Karna went inside, wore a silk dhoti, silk upper garment, armour-plate on the chest, arm bands and necklace. Sushena put a necklace of pearls and wound the turban round his head. As the chariot passed through the Süta lane, persons on the way or persons squatting in their front-yard stood up as a mark of respect for Karna. But those in the Ksatriya colony did not rise. They showed their respect merely by smile and a nod. Karna thought within himself, "If they knew that I was a Ksatriya, a son of Kunti, then they too would have stood up." The chariot covered the Ksatriya zone in less time than the Süta area, because it was a relatively smaller zone.

Dussaha was waiting at the door. Duryodhana was awaiting his arrival. With him were Dussasana and Sakuni. His other eleven brothers were never invited to this high-level consultation. Duryodhana made Karna sit by his side, and, without further preliminaries, he spoke, "You see, yesterday, we decided to delay welcoming him. We decided so because we thought there was no need to meet him formally and welcome him. So we thought it was a good idea to let the great man wait for four days before seeing us. I think it was a right decision. But on second thought, I decided to complete the ritual of seeing him quickly and then show him the gate without any delay."

Karna asked, "Why?"

Duryodhana, "Well, any delay would be utilised by him to promote his goal. It seems yesterday after-noon he visited grandfather. Later in the night, he called on Dronacharya. This morning he is said to have gone to Yuyutsu and dined there. It seems yesterday evening, he visited your house and took you out in the chariot. Of course, his grain will not cook with you. But I am not so sure about the others, who can be easily duped by his trickery. Moreover, their inclinations are already leaning towards the Pandavas. And you can be sure he will visit my father and mother. He would not hesitate to make a round of our wives and sow seeds of mischief."

Karna began to sweat. He was gnawed by the suspicion that Duryodhana might have got wind of what Krishna had said to him. But the fact that Duryodhana showed confidence in his loyalty by openly acknowledging it, was comforting.

Dussaha came and announced, "They have sent for you. Krishna's chariot has arrived, outside the court-hall!"

Duryodhana got up immediately. The other three followed him. They hurried quickly into the court-hall. Bhishma, Drona, Vidura,

Kripa, and others rose from their seats as a mark of respect for their prince. King, Dhritarashtra, sitting on the next throne did not rise. As soon as he sat down, Duryodhana said, "Before we send for the emissary, let us be perfectly clear about how he should be treated. Remember, he is not a crowned emissary. Therefore, let the door-keeper fetch him. And none should rise when he enters."

Fora minute there was stunned silence in the assembly. After a while Bhishma spoke sitting, "I am not myself a crowned ruler. Do you mean to suggest that when I attend other royal courts, nobody should stand up?"

Duryodhana, "Well, you may not be a king. But you are a universally respected person. I have seen with my own eyes that Krishna commands little respect in his own Dwaraka. Moreover there is also the question whether this emissary is coming with friendly or hostile intentions."

There was some discussion of the issue. At last Bhishma stood up and spoke, "It matters little whether a person who could get Jarasandha beaten and who helped members of our lineage to perform successfully the Rajasuya rite, wears a crown on his head or whether his hair is white like mine. A Ksatriya should be accorded full royal honour. I shall myself go, welcome him personally and bring him here." So saying, he left the hall. Vidura, Drona and Kripa followed him. Karna didn't stir from his seat. He, too, felt that, though Krishna might not be a crowned king, he should be welcomed and received with proper respect. But he did not relish Bhishma's contention that all Ksatriyas should be accorded royal treatment whether crowned or not. There was not only Krishna, but with him was Yuyudhana Satyaki. He had a vague memory of having seen Satyaki during the Rajasuya days. Besides these two, there entered some twenty persons, impeccably dressed. It seemed they were all from Dwaraka. They had accompanied Krishna to have a glimpse of the splendour of the famed court of the Hastinavati rulers, regarded as the most resplendent in the whole of Aryavarta. Only Krishna and Yuyudhana were honoured with seats next to each other. The others stood as common visitors, their eyes popping out of their sockets at the pomp and pageantry displayed. After routine courtesies were exchanged, Krishna looked meaningfully at Karna. But Karna did not meet his gaze. Karna knew in advance the result of Krishna's visit. In fact, everybody was aware what was going to be the outcome. Karna was sitting quiet, letting the routine ritual process to-complete itself. Once he even yawned. He felt sleepy. He was feeling drowsy and dull. But then realising that it was the court, he tried hard to keep the eyes open wide and awake. He heard Krishna prefacing his presentation with the claim that the Pandavas had initiated the peace talks not because they were cowards afraid of the war. Then he gave an

account of the bravery and skill of Bhima and Arjuna. Karna was fighting the drowsiness. But deep inside his mind memories persisted- He remembered the countless places he had visited after being expelled from Bhargava's school of archery. His Guru was matchless. But, Drona, the only alternative, was under the control of Bhishma." Wherever I went, "Karna reflected, "I found myself to be the best archer." He wondered whether his Guru, Bhargava, would have agreed to continue teaching him if he had given an undertaking never to serve the Ksatriya masters. But, Karna asked himself, how could a Süta with mastery over archery employ his skill excepting as a servant of some Ksatriya army? Of course, he could utilise his skill in hunting wild beasts in the forests. But then it was too late for such ideas, which never occur at the right time. But that day, however, they began to buzz in his head. He heard Krishna saying, "No archer in the world can equal Arjuna who can shoot from a running chariot or a running horse or standing, all sorts of arrows — straight, curved, metal-made or flaming. He can shoot simultaneously four arrows. He learnt not only from Drona..."Karna asked himself whether Arjuna was a better archer than he himself. But he also knew that this issue had never been settled by a direct contest or confrontation. Karna had to concede that Arjuna's sense of strategy was superior. He had experienced it at the time of cattle-raid in the Virata city or when they had gone to inspect the cattle-camps in the forest when the Pandavas were living in exile. As against this, Karna balanced the fact that he had never had an opportunity to work out independently any strategy. He thought that he had never had the kind of opportunities, support, training, and the love of the Guru, which Arjuna had in abundance! Cast out by Bhargava, he had to roam everywhere. The Ksatriya youth had plenty of chance to display their skill before the leaders of towns, getting fulsome and loud encouragement at every clever trick. Karna admitted that, taking both the Kaurava and Pandava camps, Arjuna was the sharpest and most accurate archer. Karna reflected, "Yet, I who had only learnt half from Bhargava do not find anything out of the ordinary in Arjuna. Had I had the same opportunity, I could have certainly shown that I am his equal. Also his arms are not as long as mine." Karna looked at his own long hands. And he looked around in the court to take a mental measure of their arms. He was convinced none had arms as long as his. Karna slipped back into the past, "Presenting Arjuna Dronacharya had said, The noblest among the Kurus, I have trained your grand-son to be an archer without an equal in the world. You can test him your self.' Then I who was among the Spectators, shot up impulsively, forgetting my status. I challenged, T can repeat all the tricks of Arjuna. Give me a chance to get my bow and arrows from the house.' When I put forward my arm as a gesture of defiance, the spectators were stunned. Even father who had been so anxious that his son should become a great warrior, ran

up to me in sheer fright, and raising himself to my height said in my ear, ‘Child, you should not contest with royal sons. We are Sütas.’ If that was so,how could the claim that Arjuna had no equal as an archer make sense? If father had not come near me and addressed me as ‘Child’, nobody would have known that I was a Süta’. It was Bhima who came forward immediately and asked me tauntingly, ‘Oh, archer, one must admire your courage in challenging Pandu’s son Arjuna in a contest. But first disclose your town, your street, your caste and your lineage, as well as your family.’

I replied, T am an archer. If Arjuna has the guts and the skill, let him take me on. Why worry about my origins and antecedents, my caste and lineage?’

Bhima said, 'Yes, now I know. Aren’t you the son of the charioteer of Maharaja Dhritarashtra? How dare you challenge a Ksatriya to a contest?’

Several persons there shouted that I should be caught and punished for transgressing my status. I am sure they must all have been members of the royal family. Or perhaps Ksatriyas. Had Duryodhana at that point not come to my rescue, they might have punished me..."Karna then turned towards Duryodhana. He found him watching Krishna with steady eyes. But then Duryodhana was always firm. He would always do whatever he wanted. The hand of friendship he then offered Karna had never been withdrawn till now. But Krishna had explained their relationship in a different way, saying, ‘Karna, Duryodhana then supported you not because of friendship. Not because he was generous enough to accord a Süta. an equal status with himself. He was boiling with jealousy of the Pandavas. He knew that Arjuna was a great archer. As soon as he saw someone who was ready to take on Arjuna, he seized the opportunity, and embraced you with friendship on the time honoured principle that one’s enemy’s enemy was a friend. Now you just tell him that you will not fight the Pandavas, that will test his friendship.’ Karna was worried. Was Krishna right? Perhaps this was one aspect of the truth. He recalled, "1 became acquainted with Arjuna first during the archery contest. Any contest would mean rivalry and jealousy. I, too, grew jealous. Of course, it was most natural for Duryodhana to feel strong jealousy because Arjuna was a terribly conceited cock. Later, during every incident of conflict between him and the Pandavas, I always regarded Arjuna as my arch rival, the target of my hostility and jealousy. That used to give satisfaction to my soul. Also it meant that my master’s love for me intensified. Certainly, I hated Arjuna not merely because I wanted to please Duryodhana. On that point, Krishna was wrong, and his words were not true. But then common enemies create friendship, isn’t it true? Destiny has strange ways of dealing with men. Suppose at that time I had known the truth about

my birth, and Arjuna had touched my feet as my younger brother? Who knows what might have happened. He would certainly have touched my feet, he has always shown great respect to elders. And he is fourteen years younger than me! How smoothly Krishna had said, 'Karna, put your friendship with Duryodhana to test.' Krishna's words have a magical power, they are so attractive and persuasive, and so difficult to resist. How skilfully and powerfully he is addressing the assembly! How Drona, Kripa, Dhritarashtra, in fact, everybody, are nodding their heads in appreciation! Krishna uses language so effectively that, if Duryodhana had not been made of such stern stuff, he would have been swept away by the flood of words. The whole assembly is momentarily under Krishna's grip. Is friendship a thing that was to be tested? Can one experiment with milk that turns to curd so easily..."All of a sudden, Karna began to sweat. The sticky armour-plate was unbearable. He saw two ravishing servant-maids fanning Duryodhana on either side. This was a pleasing spectacle. Karna could never get rid of the doubt whether Krishna was trying to destroy their friendship by suggesting the test!

After a while, he found his head emptying itself of all content. Irresistible drowsiness was engulfing him. The buzzing of the flies far away made him more sleepy by providing a rhythm to his sleepiness. He felt like getting-away and going to sleep somewhere. Or he must stop resisting the drowsiness. Even as he was considering the matter, sleep overcame him. He leaned his back and head against the cushion of the seat, and went off into deep sleep. Slowly his connection with the happenings in the court was dissolving, and soon it became totally disconnected.

As he heard his own snoring, Karna suddenly woke up. The face had become sticky and oily with sweat. He opened his eyes in fright. By that time Krishna had completed his speech. It was Vidura who was now addressing the assembly. He was droning on, as if he was reciting a scriptural story. Karna looked ^t Duryodhana, who looked back, and smiled, 'Well, was Krishna so boring that he put you to sound sleep!' Duryodhana seemed to say. Then he got up, and went out through a side door. He washed his face and eyes. Dussasana who had followed him, said, The Maharaja was mighty pleased.'

'Pleased? with what'

'By your sleeping off. Your sleeping was an excellent assessment of the worth of the speech and the speaker.' Dussasana guffawed raucously. That was the only way he could laugh.

Karna returned to his seat. Vidura was still on his feet. This signified that Bhishma, Drona and Kripa had their say. It was always the same. The same order — Bhishma, Drona and Kripa. Then

Vidura. Also, one did not need to listen to the actual speeches to know their contents. All of them performed to a set and expected pattern. Bhishma blamed everything on Duryodhana's friends, never on Duryodhana himself. His attitude towards him was ambivalent — a mixture of anger and love. The old man sang the strain that their boy was good but fallen on evil company. That meant that the real culprits were Sakuni and Karna. Between the two, Sakuni was made to take less responsibility. Karna thought, "I am the chief scape-goat in his eyes. After all, who am I? A Süta, a dependent. Sakuni was Queen Gandhari's elder brother. From the start, Bhishma found me obnoxious, and I found him a spleen in my stomach. Drona recites, more or less, the same Raga as the old man, repeating in a milder version the same points. He would certainly have emphasised the point that the Maharaja should never heed the advice of that uneducated lout, Karna! Well, as for Kripacharya, he is overwhelmed by the very fact of getting an opportunity to address such a distinguished throng! Most certainly, he would have cited the scripture. He would never dare criticise the Maharaja. His speeches invariably concluded with the appeal to the king, Tn short, we beg you to see that Dharma is followed, rains come in time and harvests are excellent.' This Vidura always indulged in interminable presentations. He meanders so much that one never quite knows what is the point he is making..."Just then, Duryodhana yawned, and smiled gently at Karna. Sitting to his right, Dussasana also yawned, equally widely. Karna knew that he wouldn't get any further sleep. He was determined to listen to Vidura. He ordered a servant-maid at the door to fetch him a soft drink. It was a blend of honey, juice of the Sogade roots and milk. He didn't find it to his taste. He wondered why Vidura was so wordy. This question had often taxed his mind earlier. Now, the answer flashed in his mind. Yes, it was because he was real Süta. Born of a servant-maid of the queen in the palace. But the father who had procreated him was a sage, who lived in a hermitage in the forest, devoting himself to the study of the Vedas. Vidura lacked the physique of a warrior. At the same time, he lacked the mental frame and strength to abandon the luxuries of palace life for a life of penance and study in the forest. Such Sütas naturally took to the profession of reciting the scriptures and the royal genealogical accounts. From time to time, he entertained the royal personages by giving a lively and spiced account of their ancestry, lineage, their glorious achievements, the rites and rituals they had performed, the cities they had built and the cities they had demolished in wars, the women they had brought as booty in wars, and such details. He also imparted instruction to minor princes, and commented on the code of conduct traditionally followed by the royal family. Even hoary Bhishma had not stored up in his memory so many details about the history of the Kurus as Vidura. Bhishma had special regard for Vidura because he had stored in his memory

the glorious deeds of his lineage and family. Vidura felt flattered that Bhishma valued him and his services. He seized every chance to expatiate endlessly on the great ancestors of the Kuru lineage — Dushyanta, Bharata, Hastin, Ajamila, Devatithi, and Dilipa. Karna took a contemptuous glance at Vidura. Regardless of Duryodhana's responses, his interest or indifference, Vidura went on establishing points of Dharma already established in the past. Karna surveyed the faces of all those assembled. He found only Bhishma listening to the ancient twaddle of Vidura with rapt attention. Drona never took interest in the old tales of the Kuru lineage. It was impossible to infer anything from blind Dhritarashtra's^ dried up eyes. Krishna was listening with attention. Karna was unable to decide whether this was due to diplomatic politeness or because of genuine interest. His attention turned to Vidura. The Süta community regarded Vidura as a great soul and a learned man. Now he was droning on in the same tone, with no variation in pitch, and his unkept beard remained equally monotonous in movement. Some people considered Vidura the equal of great Krishna Dvaipayana himself in terms of his knowledge and scholarship. It was also said that Krishna Dvaipayana was his natural father. He had the same build, though he did not follow in his foot-steps by going to the forest and studying there. He preferred to remain behind to enjoy the comforts of palace life. Once the cultivator-women come as servant-maids to the palace, they get used to a life of ease, and never return to a cultivator's life of toiling in the sun, sweat and earth. This idea, he realised it immediately, could apply to him as well since he, too, had abandoned the life of toiling on the earth for palace life. He consoled himself with the thought that a warrior had no option but to serve in the armies of Ksatriyas. Karna had been worrying about this issue since the previous night. It troubled him in different forms. What else could a warrior who was a Süta have done? Then he remembered suddenly the case of Keechaka, the chief of Virata's army, who was also from the Süta caste. His own sister was the crowned queen of the Virata Kingdom. And it seemed in that country, Sütas became rulers by custom. In that case... Karna didn't dare to think further. Coincidentally, Vidura brought his pointless speech to an end at long last. Karna felt hungry. He thought of getting up to eat something in Duryodhana's house. He wondered, who was going to speak next? Would it be Duryodhana himself or would Dhritarashtra intervene for some clarification? One couldn't be sure of the old man. He certainly didn't want to part with any territory but he was scared of a war with the Pandavas. He was so cowardly by nature. The way Bhishma, Drona and Vidura had constantly dinned into his ears the greatness of the Pandavas as warriors and drawn attention to our limitations, had induced a genuine fear of the Pandavas in the blind, old man's heart. Unable to see for himself, he was easily persuaded by others. Even that great devotee of husband-worship cult,

blindfolded Gandhari, had the same sort of fear regarding the results of a war. Then Karna heard Krishna make a statement. He said, 'Duryodhana, I had clean forgotten to tell you one thing. As long as your vision is clouded by the long accumulating jealousy, fear and hatred, you will not understand my words. Slough off that impeding accretion, and become a new person. Remember, war is not inevitable.'

Karna had the uneasy feeling that he had heard these words somewhere. Where? He couldn't immediately locate the source, the context and the speaker. Just then, Duryodhana asked, Does anybody else has anything to say?' The assembly was silent for a while. Duryodhana asked Karna, 'Don't you want to say anything?' It threw Karna in to some confusion. He had made up his mind to say nothing. Yet he always spoke in the court, as a matter of routine practice. Duryodhana never allowed him to keep quiet. But Karna was nonplussed, asking himself, Today, of all the days, what is there for me to say?' He was now fully aware of his master, Maharaja's position. Their usual practice consisted in a prior discussion between himself, the Maharaja, Sakuni and Dussasana leading to a decision, and then it fell usually to Karna's lot to be the spokesman of the group, to present it in the form of suggestion or a piece of advice. Then Sakuni arid Dussasana would reinforce it. The process terminated with Duryodhana rounding off the position with finality and authority. This had been done for years. Now Karna was called upon to play this game. Realising that if he didn't speak now, it would upset the rhythm of the court, he stood up immediately, to address the assembly, unlike Bhishma, Drona and Vidura who spoke sitting, in view of their advanced age.

Karna addressed the assembly in straight language, The central issue before us is the purity of the Kuru lineage. Only the progeny born directly to the father are entitled to rule. In the name of Niyoga, we cannot allow children born to strangers being considered legitimate children...' His tongue tore away from his mouth. The inner mind beyond the tongue disconnected itself from the tongue, which no w came to a stand-still. When the inner control snapped, the tongue stopped. His own past disrupted the situation as he remembered it — an unmarried girl had a child born out of wedlock to an unknown sage and unable to have it killed, gave it to her mother's servant-maid. She had been exiled to her natal home by her husband because she had not borne him children. Then when she went near his town, and sent him word of her having found a child and showed him the child, he lifted it and embraced it affectionately. He drowned his wife in his love, and took her home. Then he told everybody that the child was a gift of the Sun-God. Karna recalled, 'If I am a fully legitimate son to that Süta Adhiratha, entitled to perform his death rites, then how can I maintain with reason that children

born in a mother's womb through free choice of a seed be called illegitimate?' It was this question that had bound his tongue with ropes, depriving it of its function. The assembly was watching him in silence. They watched his care-worn face, and saw sweat streaming from his face, neck and forehead. Just then Dussasana got up and continued from where Karna had abruptly stopped. Karna felt relieved. Yet, within, his mind had solidified into silence. He couldn't hear the words of the speaker, but merely saw the gestures of his hand, the movement of arms, lips and mouth. He reclined against the back of his seat, and watched the proceedings as if they were a puppet show without speech. After the long dumb show of Dussasana came the dumb shows of Sakuni and Duryodhana, one after the other. Then there was some intervention by Dhritarashtra. There was some verbal duel between Bhishma and Krishna, on the one side, and Duryodhana, on the other. Abruptly, Duryodhana left through the royal exit. With him went Dussasana, Dussaha and his brothers and Sakuni. Dussasana came back and made a sign to Karna. It was only a little while after he joined the Maharaja and his advisors for discussion in the king's private chamber, that Karna began to hear a little. His paralysed mind had not yet returned to the normal. Dussasana and Sakuni supported Duryodhana's position with great force. They showered praise on the Maharaja by saying that his words of truth and justice were far more valuable than Krishna's deceitful speech. The Maharaja turned to Karna. But poor Karna had no idea of the context and the situation.

Duryodhana, 'Karna, what has come over you? Why did you stop your speech after the first sentence, and fumble for words?'

Karna had no reply.

Duryodhana, 'Are you ill?'

Karna mustered a reply, 'My head suddenly began to whirl.'

The Maharaja shouted for a servant-maid. He ordered her to.. help Karna to lie down on a soft mattress, and rub hard ghee on his forehead and sides. He asked her to fetch the Soma juice mixed with honey and milk.

After resting for a while and drinking the juice, Karna recovered enough to sit up. Just then Dussaha ran into the chamber, almost out of breath, and reported, "Krishna is advising the assembly to catch hold of you and tie you up, and then seize the reins of the kingdom from you. He told them, 'Wasn't it your decision earlier to send the Pandavas to Khandavaprastha? If you now fail to take right action, it would be impossible to save Aryavarta from ruin.' The grand-sire said he was right. Father, too, was nodding in agreement."

'Is that so?' Duryodhana said and thought for a minute. He said,

"Dussaha, bring the rope. Let us bind Krishna himself with the rope and throw him into the prison.' Then he went out. Dussasana and Sakuni followed him. Karna was in no physical condition to get up and move. He remained seated. He heard great noise and commotion coming from the assembly hall. There were screams and shouts. Amidst the din some words of the Maharaja could be heard. Then total silence. After a while, the Maharaja, Dussasana and Sakuni returned. The Maharaja's face was blazing with wrath. He collapsed into his seat with a thud.

Dussasana explained to Karna, 'Krishna had lied about those who accompanied him. They were no innocent citizens wishing to see the splendour of our court. They were, in fact, his body-guards. How successfully he cheated us!"

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Chapter

37

THAT night he slept immediately after he ate. But he also woke up early. He had a dream. Nothing was sharp or clear in it. Did he wake up before the dream could crystallise or the dream

itself woke him up? He was not sure. Was it the usual dream in which flooding waters engulfed him? No, he couldn't be sure, couldn't say categorically, yes or no. He heard the melody of a flute in the far distance. It must be from the colony of the cowherds. It was not yet mid-night. The music was soothing to the ears. He rolled on the bed, but sleep would not be his for the rest of the night. Yet he felt less tired than in the evening. The mind that night was less tumultuous than it was in the previous night. In fact, he had some sort of mental peace. He mentally noted that he should invite the flautist the next day to his house and listen to him playing. No, not during the day. Night was a better time for it. Must invite him tomorrow night. Then he silenced his mind and tried to sleep. The flute should be heard, he told himself not only in the night, but also from a distance. Or else it's effect would be less magical. Karna was churning his own mind, "What did Krishna say? 'Slough off the jealousy, fear and hatred, accumulated over the years, or else you will not understand my words. Step out of them as a new person. It is not very difficult, this war.' Yes, he had spoken similar words yesterday evening sitting in my chariot. I remember now. Krishna had said, Karna, the question bothering you is how you can wipe out overnight the record of your sixty-five years of living and transform yourself into an altogether new person? You are asking yourself how you can do so, under the essential elements of that record — yourself undergoing rites proper to the Süta caste, your marriage to Süta women, begetting of children and grandchildrens to Süta women, under-going Süta rites, your friendship with Duryodhana now so deep-rooted, and your equally deep-rooted hatred for the Pandavas. Well, let me tell you that the Süta rites are all outward signs, and they can be discarded to enable you to accept the newly-discovered truth about your birth. Then announce to the world your new but true identity. Then you can test whether the old hatreds and old loves generated in the old environment will survive in the changed conditions. Well, try to be reborn as a new man…' He said so many

other things. I cannot remember now. Had king Pandu married Kunti, taking along with her the son born out of wedlock, they wouldn't have had the need to go to the Himalayas because of being childless, then I would have been the only son of Maharaja Pandu. I would have been an elder brother to even Duryodhana by twelve years. I would have become the sole sovereign of the Kuru kingdom, with Duryodhana as the heir-apparent..."He began to doze. Then he imagined he was dreaming. Then even if Kunti had borne Dharma, Bhima and others, they might have allowed him the honour of performing the Rajasuya rite, being the eldest! Or he would have turned out to be Duryodhana's chief enemy! Things were moving in a totally unpredictable direction. Like a bird leaving the support of the branch, flying directionless, but flying all the same. Well, he was unable to sleep. Karna wondered, "What will be Duryodhana's reaction if he knows our new relationship? Would he say that you are the sovereign of Indraprastha, not the Pandavas? But then wouldn't he be aware that I shall be with the Pandavas? All madness! After all they were born as sons of Pandu while I am a child born out of wedlock. I was cast out, denied the rites necessary to make me a Pandava. How can we suddenly become brothers? How can one make sixty-five years of living into a pulp, and reshape it into its opposite? After all, life is not malleable mud, to be shaped at will. It is easy for Krishna to ask for it. Would Krishna have behaved as he advises me if he had been in my place? And how can any one behave that way? I know very well the nature of Duryodhana Maharaja. He would say, 'Karna, you who were a major pillar of my support and strength, have jumped over to the enemy's side. I am definitely going to fight the war. It is unfortunate that I shall have to war against you.' Should I refuse to join either party and quit the country itself? Maybe that is the solution. I am turning sixty-five. Maybe the solution is to withdraw from wordly transactions altogether and retire to a forest to live in a hermit's hut..."The appearance of a solution gave him satisfaction. He sighed deeply and rolled to the left. Sushena, sleeping a little distance away from him, enquired, "Father, aren't you getting sleep tonight also?" Determined to find a final solution to a question that was tormenting him, and therefore not wanting to be disturbed by any talk with his son, Karna did not answer. Then he carried on the self-exploration, "Yes, the best way out is retirement. But it would mean merely my own escape. I can save myself all right. It would not mean any proclamation to the world. Hence, the real solution is not just retirement but retirement after a public declaration of the truth. Yes, it would be certainly hard on me to do this. Yet can it be really an ordeal for a person who is sacrificing everything? In the light of such a momentous decision, this would be nothing..."Sushena, too, did not seem to be getting sleep, as he was also tossing on the bed. Karna was troubled by the possibility of his son knowing the cause of his worry. But he was sure that this was impossible. Karna thought about his

son, "Even when I tell him not to, he persists in giving me company here, sleeping in the same room. He is a real son, a son among sons. And all those wives, tied to my neck by Duryodhana in the cause of my status, all of them are sleeping in the hall behind, sleeping soundly after a sumptuous meal..."The very mention of the wives smashed to the ground his hopes of retirement." ...Yes, I can proclaim to the world the truth about my birth and disclose my true identity. But what would be the fate of my children and grand-children? They are all in the service of Maharaja Duryodhana. Will they switch over to the service of their uncles, the Pandavas? If not, would then the Maharaja accept them as loyal? Would they, siding the Pandavas, act against the interests of their erstwhile master, the Maharaja? Or would they decide to follow me to the forest? What a hopeless tangle! Whichever way I move, I run into a thorny thicket. But Krishna spoke well, deserving fully the appreciative nods..."He felt like turning to the other side. But in order not to awake his son by revealing his sleeplessness, he didn't toss on the bed. He kept his breath under control. The melody of the flute was drifting into the room. Coming from afar. But it could be heard distinctly only when the wind blew from that direction, but faded when the direction changed. The wind's direction was uncertain. Winter was approaching, and it felt slightly chilly. He closed the windows. The melody of the flute touched his memory at sensitive points. Yes, he thought it was wrong in the full assembly to repudiate theclaim of Pandavas to the Kuru title, without knowing the full truth. Karna said to himself, "Tomorrow I must see the Maharaja and make one thing very clear to him, and tell him, 'Maharaja, you are taking the wrong line. Your case does not rest on the ground that the Pandavas are not Kurus. They are Kurus according to Dharma, and you must accept it. But your argument against them must be different. Tell them that Indraprastha became yours wholly when they lost in the gamble the first time itself. Your father unwisely returned what belonged to you. Then they once again staked it, and that you won once again. Argue that your father had no right to grant them as boons what you had earned as a Maharaja in the game of dice. Therefore, you will not return them the territory.' But will the Maharaja heed my advice? How many of his ally kings would accept the argument that children born through Niyoga are not legitimate? And how many will accept my argument that, once a father instals a son on the throne, he has no, right to interfere in the affairs of the kingdom? The Maharaja will , i balance these claims. But I must say my say..."The decision gave J him some satisfaction. Then without making sound, he turned to the other side, and slept. The melody of the flute could be heard still. The memory of far-away things blended with the sleepiness that was now overcoming him. The sleep invading him within, rose like boiling milk rising slowly in the vessel. But the sleep was not strong enough to shut out the melody of the flute. Or was he dreaming? Relaxing

every bit of his body nerves, muscles, legs, hands, and shoulders, as well as the interstices between them, he surrendered himself to sleep. Sleep came at last. And it was sound sleep, too. It was followed by a very pleasing scene. It was a scene rising slowly out of some distant water. It was a huge assembly hall. There were a thousand pillars. In the centre, there was a throne, and Karna was sitting on the throne. By its side, there was another, smaller throne. It was occupied by Dharmaraja. It was followed by another scene. Now it was a big forest. There was an army rushing through it. In its midst, Karna was there in a chariot.

Then there was Arjuna riding on a horse, shouting, 'Eldest brother, it does not become you as a great Maharaja, to arrive like this unceremoniously. Why should you personally come for this task? We are here to carry it out. Please, go back.' Kama's dreaming consciousness tried to grapple with the scene. Karna thought, he has arms as long as mine. His bow is as high as mine. Our two bows stand together oi their own accord. They form a pair, attaching to each other. Then they eventually melt to become one bow. What a giant bow! It was as high as two persons, one standing on the shoulders of the other. It was strung by a thick, tough rope. Karna saw that he and Arjuna were shooting arrows jointly from its two ends. And what incredible speed! They were metal arrows that cut through country after country. There was a white horse, as high as his shoulder. It was roaming freely in every land. Behind it was the giant bow. Draupadi was visible through the bow. What ravishing loveliness! And a posture that exuded a self-confidence capable of capturing the whole world. Over her head stood the fish contraption. Revolving. Below in the trough lay motionless water, mirror-smooth. Karna saw himself ready to shoot and fell the contraption. The arrogant girl asked her maid, ‘Isn’t this fellow a Süta?’ And she added insult to injury, by saying, ‘Elder brother, this is a terrible insult to a Ksatriyas maiden. Who allowed him to enter this wedding contest meant exclusively for Ksatriyas?’ Then Duryodhana came forward to assert, ‘He is my equal.’ There was a pandemonium. Whisperings and shoutings. Karna was forced to abandon his act of bending the bow mid-way. What relentless contempt was there in her face! And in a full assembly, too. The throng of kings and princes watching tensely. Opposite to them was the throng of Brahmins. As he stood there, head bent in humiliation, somebody was kind enough to offer him a seat. Seated in it, Karna stretched his legs. Before him was that arrogant maiden, and this was a different scene, and much later. But it was the same arrogant girl, now a woman. Duryodhana taunted, ‘Dussasana, her husbands have realised their status. But we cannot allow a servant-maid to get away with a royal garb. It would be an insult to all royal families. Ask her to take off her saree and wear a short piece of cloth. If she refuses, you pull the saree off her body. It

doesn't matter even if you make her naked in the process. If she herself does not care about her honour, why should you?' Commotion. Whisperings. She did not bend. She screamed back, 'Süta, curse you. You can never reduce me to the status of a woman of your caste!' She hopped all over the place. Her royal garb was flying in the wind. They were steps of arrogance. Then there was the terrifying sound of drums being beaten. The drum-beater was Bhima. Arjuna was playing the flute. Not played at a distance. It was played right before him, bornbarding his ear-drums mercilessly. It was not melodious, but raucous. Unbearably ugly. Then Karna suddenly woke up. The flute had ceased. He didn't know the time. But he knew for certain that it had been a dream. Yet, there was a nagging doubt whether it was a dream or mere memory. He knew he had slept. If that was true, then it could not have been memory. As he was wondering what the time was, he felt the urge to urinate. Though he was sure that it would wake up Sushena, he threw the blanket round his body, got up and went out. The dog, sleeping near the door, shook its ears. It came to Karna and tangled with his legs. After easing himself, he raised his head. The sky looked ashen. The stars were clearly visible. Yet he sensed that there would be day-break soon. He closed the doors and went towards the river. He felt the urge to clear his bowels.

The rustle of the soft steps of the dog followed him. After crossing the town, he reached the bank where the elephant grass had grown dense. He eased himself, and then hurried towards the Sütaghatta. Though it was dim, he could still see things clearly. Since yesterday they seemed to have heaped more wood. It was obvious from the surrounding saw-dust and wood pieces that they must have worked more since he was there last. Karna squatted motionless on the bank. The dog had raked the dust to make for itself a warm niche. Then it dozed off in the space thus cleared. The outer skin of the water was smooth like the surface of a wood plank sawed to smoothness. It was absolutely silent. Utterly still. After some time,Karna got up, and exercised his body on the sand briefly. As he breathed deeply, he began to sweat. The body had lost the inertia that had overtaken it the previous day and night, and a new enthusiasm got hold of him. He entered the water and put his head down. He swam a little distance. Though the current was not as powerful as on the previous day, it still had power to pull the body. Beating the water with his arms energetically and enthusiastically, he swam to the bank, without much noise. By then, it was full day-break. Standing towards the east, he offered his prayer to the sun by chanting his praise. Though his mind was not totally focussed on the sun prayer, it was not as disturbed as on the previous day. He was about to terminate his prayer to the sun when the dog began to bark. It began to growl first, and then barked louder as if it was going to pounce on

somebody. He caught the voice of a woman shooing away the animal. He turned back to see. Fear, confusion and rapid heart-beat, and finally utter astonishment invaded him, as he saw, Kunti, white-haired and white-garbed, had arrived at the Sütaghatta. She didn't appear to be afraid of the dog. Yet her face showed a reddish blush, resulting from self-torture. She had a grave face. Karna hurried to leash the dog.

After a minute of fumbling and confusion, he asked politely, "Aryan lady, who are you? You look like a Ksatriya woman. What brings you here to the Sütaghatta.?"

"I live in Vidura's house, have b?en doing so these thirteen and half years."

"Then you must be knowing that I have never put my foot on Vidura's threshold."

Kunti didn't know what to say in reply. So she just sat still. The growling dog was held firmly between Karna's legs. Kunti cast her eyes on the bits of wood scattered on the sand. Karna took one intense look at her. Though her body sagged a little due to age, yet she had an impressive physique — long arms, wide chest, large eyes, wide forehead and a head-full of snow-white hair. She had a striking resemblance to Karna, and Karna realised that he had never really looked at her earlier.

"Karna, Krishna has told you the whole truth."

"Was it he who sent you here to see me like this?"

Again Kunti was at a loss for an immediate reply. After a mo men tor two, she replied gently, "No. I came of my own accord."

This reply gave Karna satisfaction. He didn't feel like asking her why she had come. She was unable to take any initiative. He asked her to sit down, and he himself sat on the sand. She sat a few feet away from him. The dog stopped growling and went back to the niche it had made for itself.

Kunti spoke, "No matter how many years have passed, you remain my own son. And the Pandavas are your younger brothers."

Karna did not know what to say immediately. He was mulling over the words within himself as to the full implication of her statement. Kunti spoke again, "Now your place is not here in Hastinavati, but in Upaplavya. Come, let us go..If Duryodhana offered us our kingdom, you shall be the ruler of Indraprastha. Or else the commander of the Pandava army."

"Noble lady, will Draupadi agree to this?"

"Why should she oppose it?"

"She is wife to all the five Pandavas, but now will she accept me as her first husband? Not under your compulsion, but willingly."

Kunti lifted her head and looked intensely into his face. His look in return was firm. Her look was hard. She answered, "Karna, I have brought up my sons in such a way that none of them will behave towards and talk about strange women in the way you have done. If you had had that opportunity, I am sure you would not have said the words you have, in fact, used about Draupadi. In the company of Duryodhana and his evil companions, you have fallen very low."

Karna's eyes became harder. He replied, "You feel immediately provoked because I have an eye on your daughter-in-law, don't you? I am a sixty-five year old man. My house is full of children and grand-children. I have also been corrupted by Ksatriya company, and have married more wives than I can manage. Do you grasp the real meaning of my words? Your sons may accept me as an elder brother, because they obey you. At any rate, they may tolerate me. But would she, an outsider who came into your lineage to set up the household for your sons, accept my occupying the throne as the eldest brother to rule the roost? Just as my experience has been accumulated on a different soil than that of your sons, she too was brought up elsewhere, in a land foreign to your sons. And then wouldn't you also consider the different background of my own childen and grand-children? All these diverse and disparate elements cannot be soaked, kneaded, and recast into a new kind of building in a new style."

Kunti was silent. For a while the atmosphere was filled with the silence of a grave-yard. The signs of cold on the Sütangi leaves became more prominently visible in the sun's rays just then falling on them. Karna asked, "This is Sütaghatta. The sun is born. It is time for the artisans constructing the chariots, to arrive for work. If people saw me and you talking like this, it may give rise to unnecessary speculation and rumours. Have you anything else to say? If you have, say it quickly."

Kunti was silent, her eyes fixed on the ground. She felt that his note of urgency was genuine. Yet she was struggling hard to find the right words to say on the occasion. While she listened to the shrill cry of a bird perching on a tree on the opposite bank, she did manage to reply, "It is your duty to protect all my five sons in the war. You have a particularly passionate hatred towards Arjuna. I hear you have sworn several times to kill him."

"But he is equally hostile to me. He has sworn on even more occasions to kill me. Mother, will you tell him, 'Child, Arjuna, it is your duty to protect the life of Karna who is your eldest brother?'

Will you order the other four similarly?"

Kunti found herself mentally trapped. Coupled with the astonishment that she had never thought of what Karna had suggested, there was also a kind of worry. Marshalling all her mental resources, she answered, "You accompany me now. That would prevent the possibility of brothers fighting brothers. You need not fight against Duryodhana as well. The other five will take care of the war."

Karna persisted, "Noble lady, you have not answered my question. No, I am wrong. You have answered me sufficiently clearly. But my dull mind requires a clearer answer. Motherhood and son-hood are not automatic gifts of biological processes. Legitimate motherhood is a hard earned right, involving years of solicitude and toil> years of taking care of the child's excretion, urine, breast-feeding its body, years of fondling and cuddling! You have developed it certainly in the case of your five sons. I am sure you will give them no order which will harm them. Not just that. I am sure you will not disclose to them before the end of the war that I am their eldest brother. Why? Because you know your eldest son's nature. He attaches the highest value to the traditional Dharma. Your other sons are also of a similar nature. Excepting perhaps Bhima. Don't your sons touch the feet of Bhishma, Vidura and other seniors in reverence? Suppose they refuse to fight the war and retire from it, if they were to know their relationship to Karna? Therefore, you will not tell them who I am. Am I right in saying this?"

Kunti sat, her head bent low. She had neither the strength to give him an answer nor the strength to get up and walk away. She saw sweat soaking her chest and neck. Karna continued, "I was not aware of these issues and problems till Krishna came here and spoke to me. I had believed that some unknown parents had begotten me and abandoned me in the boat. When I reached the age of understanding the meaning of motherhood and the mother-child relationship, I had initial fears about my fate as an accidentally found child. But soon my fears dissolved. My mother drowned me in her love. It seems she had been a servant-maid to you and even your mother. That is what Krishna told me yesterday.

Maybe you are aware a little of her nature. She was alive till recently, and even saw me grow into an old man. After her loss, my lack of a mother was made good by my friend Duryodhana's mother, Gandhari. You see, I am so old and yet I need a mother so badly. Of course, even when mother Radha was alive, Gandhari gave me a mother's love. But at that time I did not depend on her love so much, for I had no need to. I have never heard of a greater mother than Gandhari, not only in Hastinavati, but in any other country. She

renounced her eyes because she refused to enjoy what was denied her husband. She became herself virtually blind, closing her eyes permanently with a band. Maybe only a wife with such devotion to her husband can demonstrate genuine motherhood! On how many occasions when I went near her and touched her feet, saying, 'Mother, it is I Karna', she has blessed me with longevity placing both her warm hands on my bent head. It has been now thirty six years since Duryodhana came to my rescue when, in the archery contest, I was refused participation as a Süta. And how old was I then? Twentynine. From that day onwards, that great mother has been allowing me to share her motherly affection with her own sons. Would it be wrong to assume that she might desire and expect Karna to be totally committed to the cause of her sons?"

Again there was everywhere frozen silence. The fog layering the water in the river was not thick. The Sütangi shrubs fringing the banks stood still. The scene reminded Kunti of the cold and the snow in the Himalayas and her life with her husband there. She also remembered the pure silence of the snow-skinned mountains. She felt helpless as if the great mountains were oppressing her with their weight,and checking her words. Karna lifted his head to look at her face. Her eyes were fixed on him. As if her sight had been trapped in his eyes. He thought that she had suddenly lost her sight. Long arms, big shoulders, large eyes, wide forehead and cheeks. They were absent in Dharamraja. Bhima also always was different. Arjuna had an altogether different build and face. Nakula and Sahadeva were Madri's offspring. While such thoughts were crossing her mind, the dog began to growl, and got up. It made considerable noise. Karna turned his ears in its direction. He thought that the chariot-workers were arriving for work. The dog barked and hopped away.

Karna suddenly stood up and said, "Please, leave now. Our workers are here. Let there be no scope for false rumours or unnecessary speculations." Then he came closer to her. Clutching her legs tightly, he said as if to himself, and in a low tone, "I had decided not to call you mother. The feeling that we may not meet again ever has changed my mind at this moment. In my life, I have suffered plenty of insults and humiliations. But I have also enjoyed comforts and benefits all these years. If I now reject you as mother, I shall be guilty of lying to myself, denying the reality of happiness. Maybe you did not nourish and nurture me. Is it any the less that you bore me and gave birth to me?"

As he was rising from her feet, his head touched her chest. The bustle of people came closer. He signalled with his hand to her to leave without delay. Looking confused and uncertain, Kunti left. He pointed out the way to her with his finger, and spoke in a whisper. As she was about to disappear at the turn of the shrubs, she looked back.

His two eyes were filled with tears. For a moment she stood rooted. The water filling the lakes that were his eyes, spilled over onto the cheeks. Kunti vanished. With her disappeared a shape, a form that was clad in white, crowned with white hair, of a large physique, tall but a little sagging from the waist upwards. All that his eyes could now capture were the densely grown Sütangi shrubs, standing high with their blossoms dancing in the air.

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Chapter

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HER heart beat fast as she passed through the dense shrubs of the Sütangi grass, and it came back to the normal only after she crossed it and realised that she was no longer physically visible to her son. Then she found that there was no path at all. She understood that he had pointed to her the direction. She waded through the shrubs, carefully separating the branches on her way. She had to step carefully and slowly, and she reached the other end beyond the barking of the dog. There was nothing but branches and leaves around her, and above, the silence of the ashen sky. She had to pause for breath, control the heart-beat, heave her shoulders and stamp her feet hard to make progress. She heard the noise made by her own movement. She felt the need to sit down. And she squatted on the ground carpeted by fallen leaves and broken twigs. But before resting, she realised that her chest was aching at the point where his head had touched it as he had nestled his face between her knees. She searched the exact spot with both her hands. Her long thighs, even in their state of emaciation, were strong enough to accommodate any head. Kunti reviewed the situation mentally, "Krishna, why did you do this? It was a secret known to none but me. What kind of intelligence do you possess? It has been three days since I wept on the river-bank at mid-night. You asked me, Tell me the truth. I have come to know that Karna is your son. It seems he is the one who had been born to you before marriage, your first- born. Tell me the truth.' Krishna, I should not have disclosed the secret to you. I should have denied it, buried it forever in my belly. I would have died with the secret safe within me, burnt to cinders with me, as poor Radha did. When I arrived here a widow with five small kids, she herself sought me out, in secrecy, and I couldn't recognise her. She told me who she was. Then she told me, 'Mistress, he is now away in foreign lands to pick up archery. If the truth comes out now, it would damage your honour and status. Will you please promise me one thing? He has now become fully my son. If he were to know the truth, he may leave me. Promise me holding my hand that you will never come in the way of our present relationship. Will you?' Well, Radha, I have the satisfaction that I kept up my promise to you. Remember, it was Krishna, not Kunti, who broke the relationship

between you and Karna. You may be dead now. Yet I am telling the truth so that it may reach you." Then she raised her head to look at the sky. The ashen sky was silent with its secrets. The Sütangi blossoms rustled in the wind." I would have to tell Draupadi, 'Child, Krishne, it has been thirteen and half years since I last saw you. Will you accept as husband Karna, no Vasushena, the names I did not give, my eldest son whom I could not name? You are a mother of five and maybe your juice of fertility has dried up or maybe, as he said, it has solidified beyond union with a male seed. But on that day if you had enough juice, would you have accommodated six in your grove?' Why the devil did Krishna rake up the secret buried underground for sixty-five years, as Karna himself said, wiping out the dust of so many years? She asked Krishna mentally." In order to help the party you support to win, was it necessary to touch a raw nerve of pain?"

It was enjoyable pain she had in the chest between her two hands. She had a dreamy desire to press the spot where he had hurt her. She closed her eyes. Kunti said to herself, "After the child was born, I didn't feed him even once with breast-milk. He was an ill-fated child separated from his mother immediately after birth, and I was the one with two tender and maternal breasts aching because of its milk having no outlet. But this child deprived from birth of mother's milk, has greater sense of mother-dependence than the other, more advantaged children. Dharma, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva never showed such a sense of dependence. Gandhari, you who are blind-folded may burn with jealousy, but I have no jealousy for you because you have earned from my son filial devotion. Maybe because you renounced your eye-sight in order to forego what was denied to your husband, even my son Dharma half-closes his eyes in reverence." ...Then Kunti sat, closing fully both her eyes. The eyebrows were sticky with sweat, and her eye-lids got stuck to it. Her sight turned inwards. It was the kind of murky sight one has when under water, a sight refracted through the dim green of the water. She felt as if the desire for war smouldering in her breast for the last thirteen and half years was being dipped in cold water. She felt like telling her sons, "My dear children, Dharma and Bhima, listen to me carefully. This Karna is your eldest brother. Regard him as such, and pay him the respect and loyalty due to him. If Duryodhana refuses to return our territory, well let him not. You five, led by Karna, build a new kingdom, and conquer new kingdoms...." She tried to get up and go to tell them of her changed desire. However hard she tried, she just couldn't open her eyes and move. The eyelids got stuck, as if pasted with the sticky juice of the Bilva fruit. Maybe if Gandhari were to remove the band across her eyes, the eyelids would be equally stuck. Perhaps it is wiser to close the eyes and see inwardly than to open them! She recalled Karna's words, 'Arjuna has equal anger against me. Will you order Arjuna that it is his duty in the war to

protect Karna's life? Also the other four?' Still, with closed eyes, she remembered Karna's critical comment, 'Noble lady, you have not answered my question. No, lam wrong. You have given an answer fairly clearly.' Then she addressed Krishna in imagination, 'Krishna, in order to get your aunt's sons to win a war, you have virtually killed your aunt, in spirit, if not in body. Why did you do this? You are a sinner. You have a Raksasa mind that does not bother about considerations of Dharma and Karma.' Her anger against Krishna turned into tears. The hot tears filled the eyes and made the eyelids more sticky. She continued, accusing Krishna, 'Krishna, I used to think that you alone knew morality and fairness. Didn't your subtle sense of Dharma tell you that you should not set ablaze a fire in this old woman's belly? You bloody sinner, a sinner.' She wept bitterly for a while and then remembered. He had said, 'Aunt, we have kept this secret for so many years, and that is enough. We know the result of doing it. Now let us break the seal of secret'. Kunti rued bitterly. He said all sorts of things. Very attractive to the ears. Like a beautiful curtain being let down. But his words dissolved soon after they were spoken, leaving no memory behind. The uncovering of the curtain led to what? 'Krishna, you are responsible for everything that has followed.' She wiped her sweat and tears with the edge of her saree, pressing it hard. But the eye-lids continued to be closed. Then she forced them open. Her eyes, now open, saw the Sütangi tufts surround her. The path she had made by separating the branches had now closed up behind her. She thought, 'Suppose I go back, but then he will no longer be there. Suppose I went to his house?' The ashen sky above the head felt like a heavy weight. The heavy sky appeared to say, 'Kunti, you cannot go back.' Kunti reflected, T shouldn't have come here this morning. Then why did I come? I asked him to protect my five sons in the war. But really that was not what I had wanted to ask. In fact, I came to ask nothing. I tried to uncover and see things. No, one should not speak. The words escape our control and go their own way.' Then she fell silent. The Sütangi tufts made their rustling noise. Then the sky above was trying to oppress. She had the illusion that the sky was coming down, descending to the earth. She now had the awareness that if she had not come here like this, things would not have taken the turn they actually took. Asking herself, 'Why did I come?', she closed her eyes again. It was the same question, the only question now torturing her. After a little while, she stood up suddenly. Turning her ears inward she listened. She felt the river running to her right. She walked again, parting the Sütangi branches with her hands. First she came to a slushy terrain, and then there was water. Ten steps later, there was only water, no foliage. She washed her hands and face in the water. Then she scooped a palm-full of water, turned towards the sun and closed her eyes. She poured the water down, saying, "Radha, I was right here in this town when you died. I did not know what to do then. Here, take this my ritual

offering of water to you as a departing soul. I offer this final salute to you for being the mother of my child."

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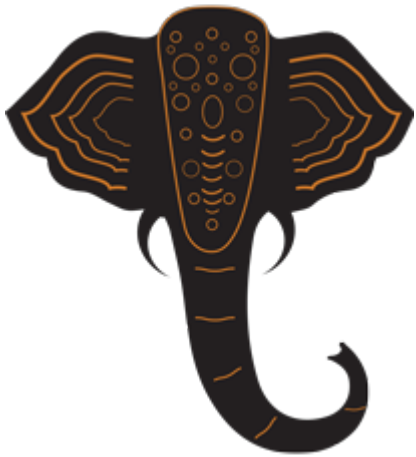
PART EIGHT



Chapter

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ONE morning, after the smoke of the ritual fire had pervaded . the surroundings of the palace, King Salya yoked two horses to his chariot and drove away. Ahead of him; the chief organiser of the camp had gone with his staff the previous night. It was his duty and responsibility to set up tents and awnings for the king, the army chiefs and the common soldiers, to each according to his status, and arrange for their night meals, and for the night watch. He managed the supply of food material,mattresses and blankets, cooking utensils, wood for fuel, all brought in a hundred bullock-carts. It was the customary duty of the peasants to supply the bullock-carts. They had left in early dawn. Some two hours after the sun-rise, king Salya himself left. In front of him were the columns of cavalry. Behind them were the chariots. Amidst the chariots was Salya's own chariot. Following him were the chariots of Vajra and Ajaya. The chariots of the three were surrounded by soldiers on foot serving as their body-guards. Behind them were rows of elephants. They were followed by fifty horse-drawn carts packed with weapons and other war equipment — arrows, bows, swords, spears, clubs, javelins, and warriors' dress material. Behind them were carts carrying women picked for the entertainment of the soldiers. In the extreme rear was the infantry. Villagers from far and near had assembled to watch the spectacular procession of the army on the march.

Rukmaratha volunteered to fight in the war. But he saw that his father was gripped by a passion for war. He was stubborn, and had told him, "It is upto you to go to war or not. I am definitely going." As for Vajra there was nothing but the life of a warrior. Rukmaratha was worried and thought, "If everybody goes to the war then who would be left behind to carry on the government and its administration? When nobody is in charge, neighbours may seize the opportunity, and invade the kingdom. It is probable that the Nagas in the northern forests might attack." It was therefore settled that he should stay behind to administer and protect the kingdom. All the men in the royal household insisted that the wives of Vajra and Ajaya should also remain behind as it was going to be a big war. The wives agreed to abide by the men's decision, but did not resist the temptation to make the pointed remark, "Anyway you have a whole army of

servant-maids to serve your needs!"

It was an equable weather, with neither winter's fierce cold nor summer's scorching heat. In the bright sunlight, the army marched continuously till after-noon. They halted for a while on the bank of a small tributary to the river Irawathy to eat and rest. Then they marched on for another three hours and halted. It was decided to camp there for the full day. The sun was still bright. There were still some two hours for sunset. But king Salya was exhausted because of the shaking of the chariot. He slept on the mattress spread on a wooden plank in the centre of the tent. He dozed off stretching his legs. By sunset he had finished his sleep. He woke, sat up and cast his eyes around. Though it was supposed to be a tent, it was beautiful to look at. It had a touch of splendour! The roof was covered with dried Darbha grass, and the walls were also similarly made. Multicoloured drapery hung on the walls. The bed was regal in style, covered with soft and shining silk cloth. There were comfortable pillows. The front door was also decorated in real style. The king got up and peered out. Near his were the tents of his sons, Vajra and Ajaya. Surrounding their tents were other structures for soldiers, appropriate to their status and rank. The person who was in charge of supplying provisions to this army was Chakshu. He had done a good job, and Salya wanted to reward him with a beautiful woman after the night meal. At that time, the Brahmin priest came to his tent bringing ritual fire, and then he fed the fire with ghee, creating a pleasant aroma. Salya participated in the fire-rite with devotion.

As father, the two sons and the Brahmin — four in all — were eating their meals, Vajra said, "The meal is in a new style. The Parivapa dish is more delicious than what was cooked by the palace cooks."

Salya agreed, "All right, let us give the cook also a reward."

Ajaya asked, "They have cooked steak and mutton. What is the special occasion?"

The Brahmin guessed, "Maybe it is some special day."

After the meal, king Salya sent for the superintendent of supplies, and expressed to him his admiration for the fine food and excellent arrangements, in general. Then he said, "Go to the camp of the servant-maids. Pick up anyone you like most, and she will be our reward to you for your services. See that things continue to be as good till the end of the war. The beauty you pick up is wholly your property."

The official replied, his palms joined in respect, "You have been kind to this poor one. But actually all these arrangements were the work of Duryodhana's men. They were just waiting for us, to

welcome us in good style. Even my staff were well fed, without doing any work."

Vajra and Ajaya were overwhelmed with surprise. Then Salya recollected. Duryodhana was not a man of empty words and ‘ promises. In fact, his deeds exceeded his words. Now Vajra and Ajaya understood the situation better. Though the ingredients that went into the cooking here were the same as back home, the cooking style had produced a different taste. It was the distinctive flavour of the Kurus and their Hastinavati, perhaps! Anyway, everything had given them genuine pleasure.

Till now a part of Salya’s mind had been nourishing a suspicion. Now even that was wiped out. He thought, "The main issue for us is not territory, who gets what. No, the fundamental issue is that Dharma must become victorious. After the contest of power, if the Pandavas are prepared to accept the path of justice, we can give them territory. Our real quarrel is with the three Pandavas, not with the youngest two. These were Duryodhana’s words that had made me deviate from the earlier promise of support to the Pandavas." He had been worrying about this volte-face. Now his mind felt satisfied, more at peace with itself. Yes, he was now convinced that Duryodhana was not a man of empty words. He repeated to himself, "Duryodhana’s deeds exceed his words." The weather was pleasant, neither too warm nor too cold. The mosquitoes had been kept out by the pungent $_{r}$ scent of neem and basil, because their leaves had been burnt around the outer walls and their smoke allowed to spread and fumigate the walls. He slept as well as he did back in his palace. As usual, he got up at mid-night. He was curious about the morning’s momentous activity—the beginning of the war. He asked himself, "Would this war really start? Or is it merely a war of nerves and threats only?" While he was thinking about this matter, a light sleep overtook him. Then he woke up, and went out with his orderly, Neepa, across the stream to clear his bowels. Then he bathed and joined the Brahmin priest in chanting the ritual formula, and performed the fire-rite. Meanwhile, the supply official who was waiting outside, came in and said, bowing* "‘We shall take care of your tent and food’, they are saying, Duryodhana’s men. They want me and my staff to return to our place with your one hundred bullock-carts. What shall I do?"

Maharaja Salya could not give a reply immediately. He sent for his sons, Ajaya and Vajra. They made the suggestion, "It is true that it is the host’s responsibility to provide the necessary facilities for the guests. Even so, wouldn’t it diminish the status of the guests if they send back all their equipment? When there is a war, who knows how long it will last? Also, their supply may run out. Let our supply continue simultaneously with theirs."

King Salya accepted this advice. But their supply official said one more thing, "They have sent twenty-five cartloads of servant-maids for the enjoyment of our soldiers. They are asking us to send back our servant-maids in our carts."

Salya thought for a minute, and then asked the official, "Does it mean that you have distributed the maids of Hastinapura among our soldiers?"

"Well, was it not their food that our soldiers ate?"

The king was silent, thinking within himself. Then he asked, "Vajra and Ajaya, did you go with the Madra maidens or Hastinapura's in the night?"

They kept silent. They could make out that their father was very angry with them. Father said, "Men all over the world gape at women of Madra land, so tempting they are. You fellows unthinkingly accepted their maids as soon as they were offered. No matter how friendly they may be, one should never accept women of other lands that easily. And especially at the time of war. From today onwards, send their women back firmly."

Nobody spoke. The father went away and sat on his bed. Ajaya went close to him and said with humility, "How can the soldiers fight in a war if they are denied this one facility? The number of maids with us is very small. Yesterday night our men were fighting for these few women. We had to reinforce our supply of women with their women. Let them also be there. After all, they are servant-maids of our friends. Should not our soldiers demonstrate their bravery and prowess in the war and enhance the fame of Madra land?"

Salya remained silent. His two sons went out, saying that they had to get ready to move. After making sure of the decisions made by his masters, the supply official left to do his work. After the break-fast, they resumed their journey. In front the carts carrying supply, then the cavalry, and then chariot-warriors, and in the middle the chariots of kings. The chariots of the kings were surrounded by body-guards. Behind them, the rows of elephants. The servant-maids and the supply staff of Hastinavati had gone ahead to look after the setting up of the next camp.

On the way, they had to cross the rivers Shatadru, Saraswati, Drishadvati and Yamuna. In addition to them, there were small streams and rivulets. Duryodhana had arranged for ferries to cross them. The boatmen ferried the chariots across the waters. The elephant-riders were ferried sitting on their animals. In the case of narrow streams and rivulets, bamboo bridges were improvised for crossing. The arrangements for transport were so good that even the infantry felt satisfied.

After journeying for fourteen days, they arrived in Hastinavati. Even a day before their arrival, Duryodhana had made arrangements to give them a royal welcome on the way. He bowed respectfully to king Salya, and embraced heartily Vajra and Ajaya. He was a strongly built person, with a wide Gandhara face and bulging chest. He looked dignified, donning the Hastinavati crown, and necklaces made of gold and precious stones. After the courtesies of welcoming, he begged them to forgive him for any lapses of hospitality on the way*Then Vajra and Ajaya went to take bath.

Duryodhana sat diplomatically on a seat some four fingers lower than the one on which Salya sat.

He spoke to king Salya, "Uncle, my younger brother told me everything. I am aware that it has been propagated that Duryodhana is greedy, he hankers after other people's kingdom, he gambles for gain, not pleasure. It is my good fortune that you could see through all this false propaganda and come to my aid. What will really save me and protect me are your heart-felt blessings, not just armies. The entire Aryavarta knows that you are a champion of Dharma. I am sure that your joining me dispels the doubt entertained by a few kings regarding my commitment to Dharma."

Salya did not say anything.

Duryodhana continued, "There is a very important thing to be settled. I waited for you so that I can have the benefit of your wisdom and experience before deciding over it. I can't explain it now as you have journey fatigue."

"It is all right. You can tell me now." said Salya.

"Perhaps you may have by now known the list of the rulers taking my side. They are all great warriors. We are now debating about the choice of the supreme commander of our combined forces. As you know, I always respect the elders, old persons. Isn't that the Arya Dharma to do so? Among the rulers on our side, you are the senior-most. My wish is that you should take up this august role, and our success in this war will go to your credit, enhancing the reputation of the Madra people in the Ksatriya world. Of course, there is also a move that, if you do not accept it, revered Bhishma should take it up. Even if our grand-father is formally placed at the head of our forces, the actual conduct of the war will turn out to be your responsibility. It is only after getting your valuable opinion that I shall persuade others to accept it." replied Duryodhna.

Salya "Revered Bhishma must be our Supreme Commander. No doubt that the office should go to grand-father."

For a while both kept silent. A little later, the uncle told

Duryodhana, "We shall be arriving in Hastinavati tomorrow. Where is the war going to be fought? And when does it start?"

"It is for the robbers who come to plunder us to decide these questions. I am least interested in the war. No, I prefer to avoid it. You asked me where? The real backbone of Pandava support are the Pancalas that means Drupada who gave his daughter to be divided between the five. He has a strong desire to destroy Hastinavati and grand-father Bhishma. That is why he has provoked and set up his sons-in-law against us to go to war. Don't you know the reason for it? It seems Dronacharya who is our guru was a fellow student of Drupada. Drona was a poor Brahmin. After Drupada became crowned as a king, Drona went to him to seek his support. That conceited fellow treated him with contempt and humiliated him. Please, tell me uncle. To what hell will a king who does not value learning, go? Can anyone who does not respect the fire rites and other rituals, survive? By the way, was there any difficulty for you during your journey in performing your daily rites?" asked Duryodhana.

Salya replied quickly, "No, no. Your people had arranged for a generous supply of ghee. My priest carried the sacred fire with him most carefully."

Duryodhana, "That arrogant Ksatriya, Drupada, heaped humiliation on respected Drona. Grandfather Bhishma has always been devoted to Dharma. In search of patronage, Dronacharya arrived in Hastinavati. We were all young boys then. This happened forty years ago. Drupada is scheming to destroy Dronacharya, Bhishma who gave refuge to Dronacharya, and Hastinavati which Bhishma defended and developed, wouldn't it be an effective strategy to split a household if you want to destroy it? That was why he gave his daughter in marriage to the five brothers so that he can take them to his camp, and now, in their name, invade Hastinavati. Kampilya is near here to the south. Their invasion will start from there. We have to camp on the other bank of Ganga and defend our land. Or they may arrive in boats to attack us. Some of us think that it is best to go downstream in the river for some distance and then wait for them."

As Duryodhana perhaps anticipated, his words made Salya boil with rage against Drupada. Salya recalled that the priest who had approached them on behalf of the Pandavas was a priest from Panchala. None of the Pandavas had come. Salya began to view the war now as one between Kurus and Pancalas rather than between the Pandavas and Kauravas. Recollecting his earlier promise to support the Pandavas, he felt happy that he had avoided committing a grave mistake. His whole mind was filled with Bhishma from

surface to depth. Bhishma was not merely a Kuru grandfather. He was the tallest figure living among the Ksatriyas. All the others were ordinary Ksatriyas. But he was a tremendously brave and powerful warrior. A celibate who was self-sacrifice incarnate. He thought, "Among the warriors assembled here, I am next to Bhishma in seniority. Duryodhana asked me to be the Supreme Commander. Let revered Bhishma occupy that position. When he is there, how can I even think of it?" Salya felt the urge to visit Bhishma as quickly as possible. He remembered Bhishma visiting him long ago to seek a bride for his brother's son. Now Duryodhana overwhelmed them all along the way with lavish hospitality. Well, the Kuru lineage was a by-word for generosity and hospitality. Bhishma, too, was as generous as Duryodhana. When he had come to ask for a bride, how many gifts he had brought! Salya recalled, "We told them that we preferred our practice of bride-price. That was all. And he showered us with gifts." Then king Salya shifted his position and leaned against the pillow. It struck him as yet another evidence of Duryodhana's exemplary conduct that he sat on a seat four fingers lower, as if he were a servant sitting at his feet. All of a sudden the king of Madra became proud of the Aryan code of conduct. With that pride in it, arose in him a determination to protect its Dharma.

Salya asked Duryodhana, "Aren't the Pandavas in Upaplavya city, making preparations for the war? But how come you have inferred that the invasion will come from Kampilya?"

"Well, they are there in Upaplavya to create an illusion that they will start the invasion from there. Actually they are between Upaplavya and Khandavaprastha."

"What is this Khandavaprastha?"

"It is the place which later they had the conceit to call Indraprastha. Its original name when we gave it to them as charity was Khandavaprastha. Now we shall win back through war the city lost in gambling. It is one of their clever tricks to spread the word around that they had no eye on Hastinavati, so that our supporters can be split. In reality, the Pancalas are making the war in their name. By the way, you do not seem to know a significant fact. There is a fellow named Dhrishtadyumna, the elder brother of Draupadi, the wife of these five brothers. He has taken over as their Supreme Commander. How come he became the Supreme Commander of the Pandava forces? Why didn't one of the Pandavas assume that highest office? Doesn't it signify that the real fighting is going to be done by Drupada's army? Where are the soldiers of the Pandavas? Their idea is to create the impression that they will proceed from there, but actually to start from Kampilya to mount an attack on Hastinavati to destroy it. That non-Arya will not rest contented unless he

accomplishes the total ruination of our Aryan culture."

The last sentence was beyond Salya's comprehension. Therefore, he asked Duryodhana, "Isn't Drupada an Arya?"

"Uncle, you are an old-timer, a strict follower of Dharma. The . inner workings of the minds of the crooked elude your eyes." He laughed good-humouredly. Then he elaborated slowly, "Half the population of the Panchala country is tribal, living in forests. That means half the population is non-Aryan. The tribals practice the custom of brothers sharing a common wife. That explains why Drupada arranged for his daughter such a marriage. Isn't this enough evidence to prove that he is not an Arya? Half his army is made up of non-Aryans. Their intention is different. They want to assist Drupada in the war with the sole intention of destroying Hastinavati, the centre of Aryan culture. Now do you understand why the majority of Aryan rulers have joined us to fight this war? Remember, all those taking the side of the Pandavas in this war are either non-Aryans or at best semi-Aryans."

Salya found himself initiated into a new business. Now it was brought home to him that he had no understanding of the inner goings on in the Aryan world. He saw that Rukmaratha knew better the secrets of Aryan politics. Salya thought, "When I was running the administration, I had spies only in name. Rukmaratha has strengthened the system of spies. In the new system, the spies reported directly to the king, not through the ministers. Well, the days of old fellows like me and our ideas of government are - numbered." Then he sighed. But he did not feel very sorry about this. He saw through the windows of his tent. He saw everywhere the Darbha grass, standing as high as one or two men. There was no path anywhere to permit people to cross the thicket. It had sharp leaves which could injure one's face and body. Salya realised with surprise that he had not noticed this while travelling. The Darbha grass ran rampant in the Kuru country in contrast to Madra country where it was very sparse. Salya wondered, "From which point does this density of growth start? From this bank of Saraswati river?" He felt that the Kuru land was a sacred land. And he asked, "What is the significance of this growth?" While flexing his limbs to reduce the ache, he thought, "The northern part of our kingdom is vulnerable to Naga attacks. All my best years were spent in fighting them. Now that most of our men are away, they are sure to come and raid in the nights. Does the small army back home suffice?" Then he felt that there was no cause for anxiety when Rukmaratha was there. The idea of the barbarians from the forests planning to destroy the sacred Kuru land, made him angry. He said to himself, "Duryodhana, at least half the Aryans are men, and only the other half, women." Duryodhana stared at him, unable to read his mind. King Salya at

this point clapped his hands. Neepa, his servant, waiting at the door, came. He sent for Vajra and Ajaya. They finished their bath in a hurry and came. He conveyed to them the gist of Duryodhana's view that non-Aryans and semi-Aryans were trying to destroy Hastinavati of the Aryans under the leadership of Drupada. Then he made his sons promise him that they would fight and defend the Kuru land with their lives, if necessary. Similarly, he sent for the chiefs of his army, explained to them the non-Aryan and semi-Aryan conspiracy under Drupada's leadership, to destroy the key cultural centre of the Aryans, Hastinavati, and also made them promise to fight to defend the Kuru land. Having achieved his objective, Duryodhana bowed to his uncle, and complimented the others. Saying that he would be there to welcome all of them the next day at the gates of Hastinavati, he climbed into his chariot and returned to his palace with the body-guards.

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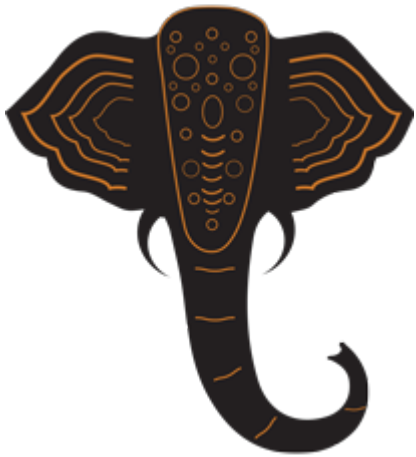
PART NINE



Chapter

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EVERYBODY was longing to see Hastinavati. They had been told that it was the oldest town in the world. How old, none knew.

It had been ruled by a galaxy of emperors. It was reputed to have been built by forty generations. The soldiers were ferried across the Ganga in the northern part of the town, and their camp was set up on the other bank of the river. Salya, Vajra, Ajaya and other leaders were taken into the town and quartered in a big mansion. The road leading to the palace alone was wide, and all the other streets in the town were narrow lanes. The houses were built of brick, most of them with more than one storey. They represented the wealthy. Behind the palace, there were brick buildings and five streets lined by huts. This was the area of the Sutás. The buildings were not separated from each other but stuck to each other. Salya was surprised that such a wealthy city should be as congested as Kishkindha. Yet, he and the others, were excited. They were proud that they had come to protect this city. The city was over-flowing with friendly rulers. Virtually, all the rulers of the Aryan world had congregated there. They were busy getting to know each other. Some of them even did not know the geographical location of some of the countries. In particular, the Gandharas from a far off land had not even heard about many of the eastern countries. Those from the south were grossly ignorant of the countries of the north and west from where the Bahlikas came. Everybody was trying to get detailed information about the others. One of the frequently discussed items was the system of administration. Such occasions of Pan-Aryan meetings had become recently rare. For the preceding many years, Svayamvaras, which provided such meets, had not been held. In recent years, there had been no Rajasuya rite performed excepting the one by Dharamaraja. The question of performing the far more difficult and costly rite of Asvamedha was out of the question. But this war had brought together many of them, and many were expected later. However, none knew the day on which the war was to start. But there was no lack of facilities for Ksatriya entertainment — dining, wining, and plenty of tasty women for pleasure. There was the great river Ganga for those wishing to swim. In the evenings, there was much horse-riding. Duryodhana made it a point to go

around and enquire after the comforts of the guests, feeding their vanity. Yet, many younger rulers found time hanging heavy, and so also some warriors. They were a group which was full of impatience and boredom. There were many who got immersed in the game of dice.

Vajra and Ajaya went round a good deal, mixing with their peers. From time to time, they reported back to their father what they had learnt. For instance, they told Salya that Duryodhana and Karna were very close to each other. Karna belonged to the Süta caste, and both Bhishma and Drona had contempt for him. Karna, too, reciprocated this hostility towards them. Duryodhana was able to pull together his team with tactful management, by pleasing everyone equally. This war had created many dissensions within royal families, between brother and brother, father and son. It seemed that Duryodhna was able to bring about a rift within the Yadavas of Dwaraka. Thus he foiled the efforts of Krishna to unite all the Yadavas behind the Pandavas. As a result, Krishna's elder brother Balarama was now on his way to Hastinavati to support Duryodhana. He was expected to arrive in the city in three or four days. Balarama was a very brave and powerful warrior, and he was also an able leader of men. Now it seemed that Krishna had gone to the Pandavas alone, frustrated. Only some four or five Yadava warriors had gone with Krishna. Krishna had attempted to split the Kaurava camp by coming to Hastinapura under the pretext of carrying peace negotiations. Duryodhana sensed this trick, and tried to get Krishna arrested, but was prevented in this by Bhishma and Drona. In fact, it was said Krishna had specifically attempted to turn Bhishma and Drona against Duryodhana. Krishna was said to have brought bodyguards in disguise, anticipating such action from Duryodhana. Anyhow, he managed to get away.

Vajra and Ajaya used to make regular visits to their men camping on the other bank of the river. The camp was dotted with tents, spread along the slope and the plain below. Everywhere there was the bustle of soldiers, and horses. The two brothers were interested in the beginning in studying the soldiers from many lands. Soon, their interest wore off. And the soldiers, too, were getting fed up with no real action. The left-overs of so many men's food was accumulating and rotting and the urine and defecation of so many men had created a veritable hell of unbearable stench. This was the strategic site where the Pancalas were expected to start their attack on Hastinavati. From there, there was no possibility of shifting the soldiers elsewhere. Moreover, Duryodhana himself had no definite idea of the number of men who would arrive, and hence advance planning was out of the question. In fact, more men than he had expected had come. Now he realised the difficulties of feeding and housing such a large number. No doubt, they had plenty of gold in

the coffers. But his stock of food-grains was dwindling. Contrary to normal practice, he was forced to collect the grain payment from the villages for a second time in the same year. And people were trying to avoid this payment by hiding their stock under-ground. Enraged by this, the king had let loose his soldiers to comb even the forests for such hidden grain. The soldiers dug the earth whenever they suspected such under-ground storing. Duryodhana had arranged to conscript strong men and women from villages as cooks for this camp. There were also rumours that soldiers from other countries, lacking active work, had taken to raiding the countryside for women and then raping them at the rate of seven to eight men for one woman. There had developed a strong and an almost hysterical hatred for the war among the populace.

Some of the angry soldiers from Madra asked Vajra and Ajaya, "They should have summoned us around the time of the war. Why did they ask us to assemble here prematurely?"

Some said, "Does not a war begin when the enemies fall on us?"

Yet others, "Even if they do not decimate us in war, we are dying like flies through diseases, some of them directly caused by the stench of filth."

The brothers could understand the feelings and anguish of their men. Therefore, they did not want to shout at them. Instead, they counselled them to be patient. Even as they did this, the brothers had to put fingers into their nostrils to block the stench from entering and then return to the greater comforts of Hastinavati.

The two brothers felt like retching. When they returned to the town, there was the same house. The same food. The same women, or the game of dice. So they went north; with the river to their right. There were so many kings around that kings had become pretty devalued! Soon the local people lost interest in royalty, and even became fed up with them. The rulers did not find it necessary to take body-guards with them. When the brothers walked a distance

of some four miles from the town, they were impressed by the large number of chariots, assembled and ready for the war. They started to count them,but lost count - two thousand? Five thousand? Well, too many to count. They realised that this was going to be a gigantic war, but they wondered, "When will it begin? Or would there be no war? Dussasana had indicated while visiting their town, that it may end up as a mere display of power, no real contest. Maybe getting wind of this massive concentration of armies, chariots and animals, the Pandavas have decided not to go to war. Then it means that our men will die here out of sickness." They hoped for quick decision, no matter which way. Vajra began to remember his home-

town. His wife was a smart talker. Every time he chose a new maid for his bed, she invented clever arguments cutting both ways, making her point without hurting the husband. Thus his love for her grew. As he saw the maddening rows of chariots, he remembered her. And was tormented by her memory.

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Chapter

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SALYA'S early sense of self-importance dwindled gradually with every passing day. Not that Duryodhana regarded him with less respect. In fact, he came from time to time to visit Salya and paid him his compliments. Salya appreciated the problems of Duryodhana, especially his responsiblity to look after so many crowned heads. Salya was consumed by great curiosity. He tried to gather from every ruler he met, information about the name, size, army and the achievements, of the various kingdoms. Such information enabled him to look at himself in a comparative perspective and his self-assessment became more modest and chastened. It also became increasingly clear to him that, if the war broke out, he, being old, would display far less fighting skill and spirit than many others. It hurt his self-image. He thought , "Anyway, I have come. Let me see the war through till the end. Also I am sure that my sons, Vajra and Ajaya, will not let down the name of Madra, and fight reasonably well." This thought gave him some comfort.

But there was one powerful reason why he chose to come to Hastinavati. It was to see the great Bhishma. It had been sixty years since he had seen Bhishma, when the latter had visited Madra to seek a bride for Pandu. Salya learnt that after that visit, Bhishma had not stirred out of Hastinavati. Of course, with one exception, that was to participate in the Rajasuya rite celebrated by Dharmaraja. Bhishma was a figure whom the entire Aryavarta respected. Madra king had hoped that Bhishma would personally welcome him on the day he arrived here. But he did not come to see him. It seemed that he had so far not met personally any one. He had not welcomed anybody in person. The day after his arrival, Salya had expressed to Duryodhana his desire to meet Bhishma. Duryodhana had replied, "He is indisposed and is taking rest. At an opportune time. I shall take you to him." Salya asked himself, "I have been here for two months now. Has he been sick all this time?" Regarding Bhishma, Vajra and Ajaya had brought two bits of information. The first was that old Bhishma was stricken with a mental illness, unable to endure the destruction of the two branches of grand- children whom he had brought up with care and love. The second was that he had no desire to fight on Duryodhana's side, and that, to cover it up, the story of his illness had

been propagated. This version asserted that Bhishma had shut himself in. No matter which version was true, it didn't help king Salya. He was worried that, if Bhishma was against the war, it meant that Duryodhana was acting against Dharma. He questioned himself, "Was I trapped by his false arguments?" His desire to see Bhishma grew stronger. One day he went in a chariot to Bhishma's palace. The doorkeeper told Salya that the master was not at home. He added that he didn't know where he had gone. Salya left the message, "The king of Madra, Salya, had come to see you." He asked the door-keeper to convey this message when Bhishma returned. Then he got into the chariot, and ordered the charioteer to proceed.

Several kings had set up their own spy systems. Through the spies, information was collected on such items as the movements of the rulers in the Pandava camp, the identity of the kings who had joined the Pandavas to take revenge on Duryodhana for old offences, who were the rulers in the Kaurava camp, who had joined it because of personal grudges against the Pandavas. Some rulers held hot discussions on many matters relating to the war. King Salya remembered his son Rukmaratha. He was sure that, had he come, he would have brought with him his spy net-work. Salya felt that he was no good at such things. It never occurred to him to have his own spy system. Vajra and Ajaya were not very much better. They were fine warriors. He himself was a very old man. Most of the rulers who had come to Hastinavati were at least thirty years younger than him. Therefore, he could not easily establish rapport with them. For instance, he could not drink freely in their company. Certainly not share women. Salya thought that at his age even to talk about women was embarrassing. Let alone the performing of brave deeds; even to wager on it sounded ridiculous for him. When there was no equality, how could there be friendship? He had to be simply content with whatever information his two sons culled for him. Often, he felt like returning home. But then, having waited there that long, how could one go ?

Meanwhile, the news arrived: the Pandavas were at last marching, with their armies. There were seven divisions, each under a separate commander. The seven commanders were Drupada, Virata, Dhrishtadyumna, Shikhandi, Satyaki, Chekitana, and Bhimasena. Everyone of them was a seasoned leader. They had all chosen Dhrishtradyumna unanimously as their Supreme Commander. Another piece of news also circulated. This was that the Pandava forces were heading north from Upaplavya. Perhaps for Indraprastha. This news shattered the credibility of Duryodhana in the eyes of the rulers assembled in Hastinavati in his support. It became clear to them that the Pandavas were interested in recovering merely the kingdom they had lost in the game of dice, and not to destroy Hastinavati. The more blunt ones told this to him to his

face. Duryodhana was also in real confusion. His dilemma was: suppose they pretended to go that way, and, fooling him, rushed towards Hastinavati, what was to be done? He realised that he had not paid much attention to this possibility. Immediately he despatched a small force under Karna and Dussasana to deal with this contingency. But the Pandava army did not turn that way at all, but proceeded north. It took Duryodhana and his advisers one full day to grasp the movement of the enemy army. Duryodhana now felt sure that the Pandava strategy was to invade the Kuru territory from the side of Hiranyavati river. He decided to meet the enemy half way, and not allow him to march to Hastinavati. Accordingly, he ordered the , / armies of his supporters which had assembled there, yawning without work, to move north-west. Now that something at last was happening, the soldiers became more enthusiastic. The armies marched in separate groups. They had to proceed on the basis of the information supplied by the spies, and there were no clear and straight roads. They had to make their way by cutting through clusters of trees, dense grass-land and shrubbery. This slowed their journey. And how long the formation of the soldiers looked when marching single file! Difficult to count, an endless tail.

Only the armies departed, but the rulers stayed behind in the capital. Duryodhana went round meeting each one of them personally to say, "Revered Bhishma has agreed to be our Supreme Commander. Please come. We have to install him formally as our Supreme Commander in the presence of all the commanders." None of them had the privilege of seeing Bhishma so far, though they had been there for so many days now. They were all eager and enthusiastic to have a glimpse of the legendary warrior. He was believed to be one hundred twenty years old. It was good that they would all fight under his command. But everybody was fired with the curiosity to know why Bhishma had been silent and in the shadow? What made him accept the command? They had no time to waste. That very afternoon they went in chariots to the court hall of the Kurus. They were welcomed more ceremoniously than before. In fact, Duryodhana had never grudged them lavish hospitality. Duryodhana's throne was in the centre of the assembly of the rulers. Next to him, on a lion-shaped throne sat Bhishma himself. All eyes were turned to him in wonder. A tall figure, but with a sagging waist and back. His head bore a Ksatriya crown. A face creased with wrinkles. His fair skin showed odd patches of black, signifying the ravages of time. His palm with bulging and white-coloured nerves, rested on the pillows on the sides. Clean wide eyes, but sunken, somewhat fierce in their effect on viewers. The head bent a little low, but did not shake with old age. Ajaya sitting next to Salya asked, "What kind of command can such a decrepit person exercise?"

Because he asked the question in a voice audible to others, Salya

became angry. Showing his anger in the eyes, he whispered, "While talking about revered Bhishma, you must use the most respectful words and tone."

Ajaya repeated the same question now in a whisper. Salya had no immediate answer. Yet it was impossible for him to talk about Bhishma in the light tone employed by the young man. He preferred to remain silent. But Ajaya was staring into his face, expecting a reply. Vajra also turned towards his father for an answer. Worried that silence might give them the wrong impression that he agreed with them, he said, at last, "Boys like you have no idea of the greatness of this warrior. Years ago, at the Svayamvara organised by the king of Kashi, Bhishma carried away the brides single-handed. Even when the entire crowd of rulers fell on him, he vanquished them. It was he who helped the Kuru kingdom to expand."

Vajra was obviously puzzled, as his eyes showed. He asked Salya, "Did you say that he carried away maidens? But isn't he a permanent celibate?"

"Not for himself. For his younger brother."

"The maiden will be happy, if carried away by the one who wants to marry her. What pleasure can she find in being carried off by one and then being given to someone else? Was this younger brother of his sitting at home playing with dolls?"

Their discussion was interrupted by the blowing of a conch. The drums roared. The attention of the assembly turned towards the old warrior. Duryodhana stood up, bowed to the assembled kings, and begged permission for anointing Bhishma as the Supreme Commander in this war. The assembly shouted agreement. Formally Duryodhana crowned Bhishma as the Supreme Commander. He was ceremonially presented with a bow, arrow and sword on a plate of gold. He lifted the sword with both hands.

This was followed by the process of choosing the commanders of the various divisions. The main question turned out to be, not who should be selected, but, who should be left out. Everybody wanted to be a commander. And they showed their enthusiasm for it. Duryodhana stood up and praised copiously his valour, loyalty, prowess and hostility to the enemy of the warriors. Then he mentioned names one by one - Drona, the teacher in archery for Kurus and Pandavas, Drona's son Ashwatthama, Madra king Salya, Karna, Bhurishrava of the lunar lineage, Sindhu king Jayadratha, Kambhoja king Sudakshana, Bhoja king Kritavarma, uncle Sakuni, brother Dussasana, and Bahlika. Everybody was waiting eagerly for the next names. But Duryodhana stopped the list at that point. Vajra and Ajaya were counting. There were eleven names in all, therefore

eleven commanders. Hence the armed forces had eleven divisions. They were happy that their father was one of the eleven. That meant they could speak through him.

The commanders were formally appointed by garlanding, painting a vermilion mark on their forehead, and offering dress and sword. For the first time, Bhishma opened his mouth to say, in a faint but steady voice, "We shall be inviting ruination of the city if we allow the enemy to reach the town. We must meet them away from the capital. Today itself commanders must march out with their divisions. I shall be with them."

How long Duryodhana spoke! But revered Bhishma finished his say in four sentences. Everybody noticed the difference. After meals, they started out. Not every ruler who had come to fight the war became a commander. But Duryodhana managed to assign to all of them status and office appropriate to the size of their armies. For instance, a group of pattimukhya — fifty-five foot soldiers was called a Patti; and an officer of the group was designated Chief of Patti. Over three Chief Pattis there was Seridmukha or Gulmamukha. Above three Gulmamukhas was Ganamukha. Everybody had a title, and nobody was left out. Vajra and Ajaya became Ganamukhas.

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Chapter

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RIGHT from the morning, the soldiers were marching out. Interspersed between the marching soldiers were carts carrying provisions and essential articles, tools to repair the chariots if they broke down during the war, a stock of leather strings, needed to

fasten various things, the implements to control the elephants; spears; javelins; pouches to store arrows; metal clubs; pennants; ropes of different sizes and thickness, coir-rope, mattresses; oil; jaggery; phials containing poisons for tipping the arrows; spiked clubs; poison-tipped arrows and leather garments. The number of carts matched the number of soldiers. Two-horsed chariots, four-horsed chariots, and chariots with special flags if occupied by a recognised warrior. Every chariot was accompanied by two body-guards on horses and two men on foot to safeguard the two wheels. Every charioteer had decorated his chariot with flowers. They were picking flowers all along the route. The scramble for flowers created often traffic congestion. At the extreme rear were the elephants. From their backs dangled bundles of fodder, and on the thickly mattressed seat sat seven persons, two of them professional elephant-keepers carrying instruments used for controlling the animals. Two of them were expert archers, while two were skilled swordsmen. The seventh was an expert wielder of javelin, who could hit the target from great distance. Their weapons were stored in the centre of the seat. They were second to none in bedecking themselves with garlands. Their elephants, too, were decorated with huge garlands round their necks.

During their sojourn in Hastinavati, Vajra and Ajaya had picked up a number of friends. Among them was Bhoori of the lunar lineage. He had become their closest friend. Duryodhana had appointed his brother Bhurishrava as a commander. This Bhoori and another brother of. his, Shala, had become Gana chiefs, along with Vajra and Ajaya. Bhoorishrava had his own spy network. Therefore, the two sons of Salya were kept posted about the current happenings. When proceeding to confront the Pandava army, Bhoori, Vajra and Ajaya travelled in the same chariot.

Ajaya asked, "It seems the Pandavas have only seven commanders. Doesn't that mean that they have a smaller army than ours?"

Bhoori said, "Yes."

Vajra continued, "Remember Duryodhana claiming, nobody is with them, and the entire Aryavarta is with him. But seven divisions is not a small army."

The chariot was four miles away from the town. It was a royal road up to that point. But the road had been made uneven and hole-ridden due to the use by horses of chariots,elephants and carts recently. In the shaking chariot Ajaya said, "Don't you think that commanders on their side look relatively younger?"

"Certainly. Their Supreme Commander Dhrishtadyumna must be around fifty or fifty-one. And ours is said to be one hundred and twenty or twenty-two years. Shikhandi is said to be much younger than his brother Dhrishtadyumna. Satyaki and Chekitana would be around fifty. Though Bhima is fifty-two or fifty-three, he still has the power and strength to take on twenty professional wrestlers single-handed. He has the force of a young bull. He rushes fearlessly and without wavering in his direction. Of course, only Drupada is an old man. Maybe anywhere from seventy to seventy-five. I am not sure of Virata's age. It seems only a few days back he got his sixteen year old daughter married. Daughter of the younger wife. He must be below seventy and above sixty." replied Bhoori.

Ajaya asked, "What about our side?" But he himself answered, "I have seen Dronacharya. He must be between seventy and eighty. My own revered father is eighty-four. That is what he himself says. Only that tall fellow, Jayadhratha may be between forty and forty-five."

Bhoori agreed, "Yes."

"Sakuni is Duryodhana's mother's elder brother. Didn't you say yourself that Duryodhana and Bhimasena are of the same age? That means fifty-two or fifty-three. Well, I guess that makes commander Sakuni around eighty-five. Don't you think that by his looks Karna is sixty or sixty-five?"

Vajra agreed, "Yes, yes. I have seen him."

"Your brother Bhoorishrava is comparatively young. But I have not seen Kritavarma and Sudakshina." replied Ajaya.

By then, the chariot left the main road and took a turn to a side. To facilitate onward movement, the soldiers went in advance to clear away the dense foliage on the way. Though it had been four months since the last rains, there was a thick growth of shrubbery, creepers and trees. The movement of so many men, animals and vehicles had

kicked up slush. Naturally, the pace of the march slowed down. There appeared to be some commotion in the elephant section. Only the noise was heard, but nothing visible to Ajaya and his fivo companions. It was physically impossible to get down and see what was happening. Ajaya, an expert hunter, guessed it and explained, "The elephants must have created the commotion by pulling out the trees with their trunks. Or by mistake male and female elephants might have been clubbed together, and the males got excited."

Bhoori saw the sexual joke and laughed, saying, "Our tents, too, have their supply of maids."

Vajra asked, "Don't the young fight better than the old?"

Ajaya answered immediately, "Ask the old men. They say that, for the young, there is nothing more important than wine and women. Doesn't my father say it all the time?"

Vajra intervened, "Duryodhana does not listen to the elders. They say he is full of self-importance. Then how come all his commanders are old men?"

Ajaya, "He doesn't listen to old men,but he cannot do without them. They must be cursing him for not heeding their words, and he must be stubborn in not listening to them. It seems he cannot do without their abuses. Perhaps,, they, too, cannot do without his stubbornness, and also his readiness to be abused, "Ajaya replied.

The movement of the chariots slowed down again. It seemed that some chariots had got stuck somewhere ahead. Because of the slope, some preceding chariots dashed against the ones that got stuck. They were, therefore, trying to divert the march to a side road, being cut specially for the purpose. It would be some time before the march could be resumed. They all got off and urinated. Some even went to defecate a little further off.

The chariots carrying Ajaya and his companions began to move slowly. But red ants had invaded their chariot. They noticed their presence only when Bhoori's thigh was sharply bitten by them. They were everywhere. Not just red ants, but black ones, as well. On the frames of the chariot, on the blankets. It became impossible to remain in the chariot. They got off and walked. Behind, an elephant was dancing mad because the ants had bitten it.

Then they changed the road. They stopped the chariots and let the elephants rush first in twos. The road made by their crushing appeared easier to negotiate. After the horses, followed the chariots.

Vajra still on foot asked, "Don't you think that the Pandava army has also the same difficulties?"

After thinking for a minute, Bhoorishrava answered, "They are the invading party. They have the advantage of choosing an easier route. I do not know how they are moving right now. Our spies gave us details only about their march from Upaplavya city."

"Tell us those details, "asked Ajaya

Bhoorishrava replied, "Bhimasena led their army. Followed by armed Nakula and Sahadeva, Arjuna's son Abhimanyu, Draupadi's five sons, Vindhya, Shrutasena, Shrutakirti, Shatanika and Shrutasena — all said to be fine fighters. Their uncle Dhrishtadyumna had trained them. Abhimanyu, Arjuna's son, recently married in Virata city, is brave, though only sixteen. He can rush on anyone. Behind them, carts carrying provisions. Then servants. Behind them the Panchala army. Then arsenals and weapons. Medical men. Then medicines. Following them were Kekaya princes. Behind them Dhrishtaketu of Chedi country, around fifty. Following him, king of Kashi's son, Abhibhu, and Shreniman, Vasudana, Shikhandi, all round Dharmaraja to protect him."

They couldn't talk steadily as the uneven road distracted their attention.

Their army certainly marched fast. Yet there was confusion. Too many men, vehicles, and animals negotiating a bad road. Slushy patches swallowing the wheels. By the time they reached the Pandava camp, they were in an utter and disorderly mess. It took them three days to reach there without proper food and sleep.

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Chapter

43

THE Kaurava forces camped some four miles away from where the Pandavas had earlier camped. There was enough space, certainly. The soldiers cleared the area by cutting away shrubbery, grass and trees. There was a general feeling that this would be the site of the war. On the very day they reached the spot, a war council was held under the presidentship of the Supreme Commander, Bhishma. In the heart of the camp was the tent constructed of bamboo poles and leaves of wild trees, and walled by cloth. In order to keep the cold out, its roof was covered with a layer of soft cotton. Exhausted by the journey, Bhishma was resting inside it, leaning against a pillow. The others, too, were quite tired. Only Duryodhana, Karna and Jayadratha were in high spirits, unmindful of the physical exhaustion. Kripa, Drona, Aswatthama, Salya and others sat, quiet and grave. Bhishma had removed his crown, and his head showed the black patches caused by old age. Yet he spoke in a clear voice, "Well, we have now reached this spot, and if there is to be a war, it shall be here."

But Bhishma did not offer any definite and detailed suggestion or advice. He did not raise any questions. The others were silent. Even the great warrior Bhishma did not say anything further. He lowered his voice and stopped speaking.

Duryodhana said, "Well, all these great warriors have come all the way to make war. We have rushed from Hastinavati only for this purpose."

After yawning slowly once, Bhishma said, "You boasted that, if only we massed our army and demonstrated our strength, they would come crawling, begging for mercy. Our army is massive. And if they come crawling how can there be any war?"

King Salya nodded in agreement, "Yes, yes."

Duryodhana tried to shift the blame on the enemy, and said, "But you can see that they are there prepared to give us a war."

Bhishma, "That is what I said. Let the war take place. I had never seen before such massive armies collected at one time and in one

place. Their army is no less massive."

Duryodhana asserted anxiously, "But their army is no match for ours. There is no cause for fear."

Bhishma, "I am not saying this because of fear. You keep quiet for a minute." Then he turned to Drona, "Great Preceptor, please give us your expert estimate, according to the science of warfare. None here has greater grasp of that science than you. Was there a confrontation between such massive armies in the past?"

Drona replied, "No." He was a tall, gaunt figure, more a collection of jutting bones than bulging muscles. He was squatting stiff-backed in half lotus posture.

Bhishma continued, "We are accustomed to much smaller wars — a few chariots, two to three hundred warriors, a few elephants, attacking the enemy with sharp arrows or seizing of a town by surrounding it. But this is an incredible spectacle. Armies on what scale and how many of them! When both sides possess such vast resources, what kind of war will it be? Armies from so many different countries, each distinguishable by its own special identity. Each king's chariot displaying a separate banner. These can be easily remembered and identified. But those soldiers there, wielding spears, swords and javelins? As soon as the sides rush against each other, there is bound to be some confusion of identity. It is likely that our soldiers may attack out of ignorance our own allies. It is likely that our elephants might crush our own men with their feet and then smash them to the ground with their trunks. How can one manage such a situation?"

Drona, "Yes, I am also thinking about all this. I see no answers."

Saindhava, Salya and others were not aware of these problems. They were brimming with the naive confidence that they had such a massive army that they could smash, crush and destroy the enemy easily. Just then, a sentry came and informed them that the manager of stores was waiting at the door. The chief manager and supplier of provisions entered with Duryodhana's permission. He respectfully bowed to Duryodhana and Bhishma, and spoke:

"If you tell me the precise spot of the war, I shall arrange to have the supply system set up. Now everybody is under the impression that this spot where we are camping is going to be the battle-ground. The armies of our enemy who had arrived here earlier are strategically better positioned. About three or four miles away from here is Hiranyavati river. They are camping on both banks of the river. They have so organised themselves that on the upper portion of the bank such facilities as drinking water, cooking and bathing water are available, and in the lower portion there is water for the horses

and elephants. For the long stretch of some fifteen miles of the bank, they have their men planted, denying us access to water. We have no way of getting water from that portion of the river. Of course, twelve miles behind us there is the Vaisampayana lake. But how can we manage to transport water from there for such a huge army? As for providing water to the animals, it is just impossible. Then we have also the problem of providing bathing water for the men. For lack of adequate water supply, by tomorrow evening our camp may start to stink terribly with urine and defecation."

Duryodhana, in a sudden rage, asked, "Is the river their monopoly? Have we no share in it?"

Bhishma said calmly, but with just a hint of irony, "Don't they have to get back their share of the kingdom through war? We, too, will have to gain our share of the water through war only. Would they give us access for the mere asking?"

Duryodhana thought, "He is speaking in their favour, even after becoming the chief of the army. At this rate, how are we going to win this war?"

Kripacharya asked, "Is it not possible to drive them away from here and occupy a strategically suitable terrain?"

Drona, "How are you going to do this?" Then he elaborated, "Suppose we turned right and proceeded to the upper portion of the river, that would be a signal for them to rush towards Hastinavati, that means we are finished. Suppose we moved in the opposite direction towards the lower portion to take up a position of access to the water, that would mean that we shall have let them into our kingdom. Even if we go back, we shall not find a river as convenient as this one. Only the flowing water of the river has power to cleanse so many men and animals. Never any standing water. By the time we encounter them, they would have been ahead of us by a da/s distance. That is why they have deliberately occupied both the banks, waiting there, expecting us."

The manager of stores and supply said, "We also have information that they built bamboo bridges across the river at several points. They are also believed to have brought wooden boats. Now they are making bridges with wood rafters to enable them to move men and material across the river."

Bhishma ordered the manager, "They have captured a very strategic position. We are helpless. The only solution is to get more carts and transport water through them. Also see that the urine and excretion are buried underground." Bhishma made sign with his eyes for him to leave. After his departure, Bhishma returned to the topic under discussion, "Great Preceptor, how are we going to

manage this gigantic war?"

Drona, "Though their army is not as big as a ours, it is still a very large one. How will they also manage it?"

Bhishma, "As you have been teaching, there are two sorts of sides in a war — the attacker and the defender. Isn't it so? The attacker, more than the defender, tends to work out a plan with minute details. Tell me, are we going now to attack or defend?"

Duryodhana declared, "Of course, attackers."

Bhishma, shook his head and said, "I accepted the supreme command of this army in order to defend Hastinapura and the Kuru kingdom against,them. I am against attacking them."

Karna, opposing Bhishma, said, "If we go on weighing so nicely the positions of attacking and defending then we shall never win the war. If our intention is to win, then we must attack first."

Bhishma, "Karna, when an elder, an expert teacher of archery like Drona, is thinking patiently and hard, it is very improper for you to intervene abruptly like this. If you are a little patient, it will redound to the honour of our meeting and also to your personal honour."

Duryodhana realised immediately that Bhishma had deliberately cut Karna to size. Karna's face turned red with anger and shame. He caught Duryodhana's gesture, suggesting that he should put up with it for his sake. After a minute's thought, Drona said, "Look, it is time for sun-set. The war cannot start today. In about an hour or so, it will be dark and nothing will be visible. Why should they rush at us in such a darkness? But this is what I guess: they are not likely to sit idle. Remember they have wily Krishna on their side. He has assumed no direct command. Yet he may be the one working out the strategy of the entire war. At an early age, he managed to kill such a powerful king like Kamsa. How easily he got Jarasandha destroyed! Of course, his strategy requires a lot of daring. They have on their side dare-devils like Bhima, Arjuna, Satyaki and Chekitana. One chief characteristic of his strategy is lightning speed. I have been keeping track of his activities and achievements, and this is what strikes me most about them. Therefore, they are bound to attack us tomorrow morning. It wouldn't surprise me if they do it this night itself. Or they may create confusion for us here, and then march on Hastinavati."

Duryodhana, "When has Krishna fought such a massive army?

Drona, "Never."

Bhishma was silent. His sunken eyes were half-closed. Then slowly they closed fully. Only Drona knew that they closed not with sleep. Salya and others simply looked on. After a while Bhishma opened his

eyes and said, "Since this is a unique war, the kind of war never fought before by men, it may be mutually advantageous to both sides if they can work out a common code of conduct. At least we can avoid unnecessary sacrifice of life. We can spare the lives of those who are not willing to die. And avoid the confusion on both sides. We and representatives from the enemy can get together and arrive at a mutually agreed code of conduct. Both sides can then abide by it."

Drona backed him, "Yes, but we must do this soon. Immediately."

Duryodhana opposed, "After all, we are fighting a war. What sort of code of conduct can regulate the business of killing? Above all, I am not in favour of meeting them at this juncture."

Bhishma, "Since I have been made the chief of the operations, the war shall be conducted according to my decision. The great preceptor has also agreed."

Drona added quickly, "Yes, yes."

Bhishma called his personal priest, and instructed him, "We think that this war should be conducted, as far as possible, * according to Dharma. To settle the code of conduct regulating it, before the war, we have to hold discussion with the leaders on the Pandava side. Go and find out from Dharmaraja where and how it should be carried out. Tell them that this Bhishma is responsible for their safe conduct and free movement, if they choose to come here. If this is not agreeable, I am ready to go to their camp. Go in a chariot and identify yourself as an emissary of Bhishma. Their sentries will inform Dharmaraja. Say it is urgent."

The priest left immediately.

Bhishma said, "It will take at least two hours for him to go and return. For now, please go back to your tents and take rest. Also look after the armies under your personal command." Then Bhishma got up. He, too, was in need of rest. His own tent was next to the tent meant for the war council. After everybody had left, Bhishma stayed behind, relaxing against a pillow and dozing off. Duryodhana left to look after other matters. After some time, Bhishma called the servant-maid to get ready the material for his evening fire ritual.

As expected, the priest returned after three hours.

He reported, "Dharmaraja and the others have sent their salutations. They have enquired about the welfare and health of yourself and the Preceptor. They have agreed to a meeting on a spot between the two camps at a mid-point. They will send four representatives and we, too, should send four. They have also laid down the condition that both the sides should not have separate charioteers to drive the chariots. They have said that, though they

had full faith in the power of the words of respected Bhishma and the Preceptor Dronacharya, they have asked for a guarantee from revered Bhishma that he would protect the four representatives of the Pandava side against any possible attack by Duryodhana to kill them taking undue ad vantage of the opportunity. Nor should there be any attempt by Duryodhana to imprison them."

Bhishma, "Who said these last words?"

Priest, "Krishna of the Yadavas."

Bhishma, "Have you told these things to anybody else?"

Priest, "Yes Maharaja Duryodhana was waiting on the way and he got from me the detailed account."

Bhishma considered the situation for a minute. Then he spoke, "You go back again to the Pandavas. Tell them not to come to the mid-point. We shall ourselves go to them in a chariot. Tell them they can meet us in their camp itself. Don't tell about the change in the plan to anyone else in our camp. If Duryodhana or a sentry asks you about the content of my message, tell them that Bhishma has agreed to the suggestions of the Pandavas. Leave now immediately."

Bhishma sent for Drona and Salya. It was decided that the three should constitute the team to meet the Pandavas. They took their meal together. Salya tried to back out of the idea. He was tormented by the guilty feeling that he had deserted the Pandavas after first promising them his support. Bhishma asked, "Why don't you want to go with us, Salya?" Unable to explain, Salya consented. This time, the priest returned sooner than before. He finished his fire ritual quickly and got ready to go with the team. They took him as their guide. The four sat in a chariot drawn by four horses. There was half-moonlight. The surrounding land scape was dimly visible. There were occasional clumps of trees. Also short grass. The silence of the evening was punctuated by the cries of elephants and horses in both camps. It took them less than an hour to reach the outskirts of the other camp, and they went in the torch light. They could see the lights of the Pandava camp. The dogs began to bark sensing their arrival. The sentries approached them, helped them get out of the chariot with great courtesy, and then ferried them across the river. Then they were taken to the rival camp. The visitors could easily see that the enemy's camp was far better organised and far more orderly than their camp.

As they arrived in the chariot, and proceeded towards the council tent, at the door were waiting Dharmaraja, Nakula, Krishna and Arjuna. They touched with reverence the feet of the elders, and then took them inside. After they had taken their seats, their army chief, Dhristadyumna, arrived. He bowed to all as they were his elders. The

visitors sensed that he did not really have the same attitude of respect and affection which the Pandavas showed genuinely. In fact, they could see that he continued to harbour the traditional hostility and contempt towards them. They sat on the thick and soft mattress and leaned against comfortable pillows. They were offered honey and other items of hospitality. Then Dharmaraja sat down, and so did the others. None of them seemed to be sure about how they should start the deliberations, because of the novelty of the situation. Bhishma and his two companions who had remained dumb throughout the journey continued to be dumb. Drona found himself tongue-tied. After a while, Dharmaraja broke the ice, "Grandpa, Great Preceptor, it has been fourteen years since I last had the privilege of your sight. Uncle Salya, you have become very rarely accessible to us. You live so far off."

These three felt as if their hearts bled. Fourteen years ago, when Dharmaraja was forty, his body and face had been full-blown. His eyes used then to exude contentment. Arjuna who was then thirty-five or thirty-six, appeared to be the very incarnation of the courage and zeal of the Aryan people. Now Dharma looked as sallow as a bamboo pole, with a face covered with loose hair. His eyes which had generally been calm, were now empty and full of despair. Utterly helpless. Bhishma had learnt from Vidura that Dharma was nowadays wholly under Bhima's control. Now he saw proof of it. Bhishma asked himself, "Where is Bhima?" He stopped worrying when he realised that Bhima had no patience to see the chief commander of the enemy forces, his grand-father. He was haunted again and again by the questions; who was responsible for their exile in the forest, bereft of their kingdom, and their servitude in other men's house, for twelve years? How long could gambling remain an amusement and when does it become an instrument of exploitation? But he didn't speak out. Drona also sat silent and grave. Salya remained lackadaisical.

After they had been silent for a few minutes, Krishna opened up, "Grand-father, we have assembled here to find out how best this war can be conducted without needless sacrifice of human life. I am sure you must have given some thought to it. If you please tell us what you have in mind, then we shall be in a better position to formulate our own opinion."

Bhishma's mind now leaned to this side. He replied, "Yes, Krishna. We have come only for that purpose. So far there has never been a direct war between such huge armies. If the two sides rushed like mad, wild bulls from opposite directions, smashing arms, legs, bones and killed each other, what joy can be there? If that is all this war is going to be, neither I nor your chief commander Dhrishtadyumna will have any work. Let us discuss and decide on our respective

responsibilities. Right now."

Salya most unexpectedly intervened, "Bhishma, everybody addresses you as grandpa. What shall I call you? Well, let me also call you grand-pa."

Bhishma, "No, no. Call me Bhishma. But what were you about to say?"

Salya, "Well, you explained the responsibility of the chief of the army, all right. But one question is bothering me: Should this war take place at all? Is it not possible to avert it?"

Bhishma, "You address that question to Krishna. He will explain to you its inevitability. He and I both tried to avoid it. We couldn't. Now it is out of question."

Salya, "Then why did you agree to be Duryodhana's chief of army?"

Nakula who had been silent so far, spoke, "Uncle, why did you who sent word with our emissary that you will support us, join the enemy's camp with your army, and became one of his commanders?"

Salya stared at Nakula's face. He found it to resemble more or less his face or his son, Rukmaratha's face. After all, he was his sister's son. He was getting on to fifty. Looked a quiet character. Didn't look like being a slave to the sons of his elder mother. Salya asked himself: 'Did Dussasana lie to me about him?' His mind was thrown into a dilemma. Bhishma asked him, "Go on, tell us, Salya. Don't hide anything. It would have been natural if you had gone to the support of your sister's sons. Was there some special reason why you came over to our side?"

Salya found himself in a tight comer. He asked himself: 'Why did I join Duryodhana's side?' He recalled the events leading to it.

He felt like narrating the true story. Deciding to tell it he said, "You know, my sons are chummy with the Trigartas. They are Duryodhana's friends. Leave aside my sons. First I had decided to take the side of the Pandavas. Then later one day Duryodhana sent his brother Dussasana himself. Dussasana had poisoned my mind . against the Pandavas, by saying that Kunti's sons ruled the roost and bossed over Madri's sons. He had claimed that the Pandavas had condemned their step-brothers to menial labour, to tend the horses and clean the horse dung. He assured me that if they won the war, they would crown my nephews, Nakula and Sahadeva. He also assured me that there will be no war. It would merely be a demonstration of strength. He argued that Pandavas could be brought to their senses, and accept justice, if the Kauravas showed greater strength. He asked us to join him for this reason. All my sons were also adamant and insisted on joining Duryodhana's side. They

pointed out to me, ‘Look at the arrogance of the Pandavas, they sent an ordinary emissary. But Duryodhana sent his own younger brother’. Now tell me, Dharmaraja, why didn’t one of you come?"

Nakula himself answered, "Uncle, he has been preparing for years to go to war. How could we, undergoing exile in the forest and servitude in incognito? Were we really in a position to make personal visits? But you promised your support to our emissary."

Salya realised that he had made a fool of himself. It made him tongue-tied.

Nakula said, "The ranking among us five brothers is as follows. Kunti’s eldest son, Dharma, is number one. I am number two. The third is Sahadeva, and Bhima and Arjuna come last. Now you know the truth. Well, at least now, come over to us with your army."

His uncle felt simultaneously scared and re-assured by these words. Confused, he fumbled for a reply, "After enjoying Duryodhana’s kind hospitality, receiving such treatment from him... Am I not an Arya, child? Shouldn’t I continue to be an ‘Arya!"

Krishna asked, "Grand-father, isn’t it your desire that we must convert this war, as far as possible, into a war of righteousness, a war in the cause of Dharma?"

Bhishma, "Yes, Krishna."

Krishna, "It cannot be a war waged for Dharma, if the princes and rulers participating in it are not clear about its goals, and show a clear understanding of the reasons for joining the side they have joined. If even a close relative like Salya does not know the truth, do you think others in your camp are aware of it? Similarly we, too, might have lied to our supporters. Therefore, we shall explain to the rulers on your side what we take to be the real causes for this war, and then appeal to them to defect from you and join us. In the same way, you, too, can appeal to our side and persuade them to join your side. After this, the war can start. Let this be the first rule of the Dharma war. As for you, Salya, an Arya is not bound by the hospitality and solicitude of a liar."

Drona thought for a while. Then he spoke for the first time, "Krishna’s words are fair and just. But Duryodhana will never agree to this."

Krishna, "Many people fight without understanding the truth. Should we not prevent it?"

Bhishma, "Preceptor, we must persuade Duryodhana to agree to this."

Krishna, "Grand-father has grasped immediately the cause of

justice."

Salya, remembering something, said, intruding abruptly." There is one more reason why I joined Duryodhana's party. We cannot know Arya Dharma better than Bhishma. I concluded that, if he is on Duryodhana's side, I, too, should join him, since Bhishma can never go against Dharma."

Dharmaraja said in humility, "I, too, wanted to ask about this. Was Duryodhana right in denying us our kingdom? If he was not right, then why did you join his side? You as the original sovereign of the entire kingdom had no obligation to him on the ground that he had fed you and maintained you. It was you who saved, sustained and developed Hastinavati and then gave it to him. Your enjoying a handful of rice in old age cannot be considered a debt. In fact, it is your right. Therefore, I am sure there must be some subtle point of Dharma in your taking his side. If so, please tell us. We shall withdraw from this war."

Bhishma answered, "I cannot openly and directly explain why I accepted the position of the chief of the army. My mind told me that my accepting it would promote the cause of Dharma. He is also my grandson like you, and I cannot disown him."

Dharma, "We are fighting this war not merely for the kingdom. But to proclaim to the whole world that we are your grand- children." The words gladdened Bhishma's heart.

It was past mid-night by that time. Bhishma, Drona and Salya, who had made a journey, were quite tired. Excepting for Arjuna, the Pandava team, too, was feeling sleepy. Therefore, both the sides were anxious to settle the rules and norms of the war. They accepted the existing Aryan rules of warfare, without controversy and discussion. They forged a few new ones. The war was agreed to be fought only during day-time. When it grew dark, both the sides were expected to blow the conch and retire to their respective camps. If any person or persons left the field unable to fight or exhausted, he should not be killed. A warrior in a chariot should engage only warriors in a chariot. The soldiers on elephants should fight only with their opposite numbers. In the same way, cavalry must engage cavalry. The infantry should engage only infantry. Any soldier or commander can choose anyone on the other side for a direct hand-to-hand fight. Such a contest should commence after the party accepted the challenge and came and announced that he was ready. In such a fight, no outside person should interfere. Those surrendering and those imprisoned should not be killed. It was positively forbidden to kill those running away showing their back, those whose weapons had been exhausted, and those whose armour-plate had been torn. No weapons should be directed against those tending the horses, those

carrying supplies, those carrying weapons for the soldiers, and those in charge of blowing the conch, and those beating the drums.

The deliberations prolonged till dawn. If they had discussed other than the rules of war, they would have had many more things to sort out. But none referred to them. Then the three visitors stood up. The other four touched the feet of the three and paid their respect. While touching Salya's feet, Dharma asked, "Uncle, now you know better what is Dharma in this situation. When we announce that persons on either side can change their sides after reconsideration, you please come over to us. With your army."

Looking at Salya's face, Krishna said, "Oh, King, if you can come over with your army, we shall be most happy. If your sons put great pressure on you, it would be difficult for you to come over to us alone, leaving your army behind. A ruler without his army is as powerless as an army without a weapon. Therefore, you stay back with your army. But let your blessings and best wishes be with Dharma and its followers. In the same way as grand-father Bhishma's are with us, though he is the chief of the enemy armies, Preceptor, we beg of you to do the same."

Bhishma's priest was sleeping in another tent. They woke him up and then the four got into the chariot. The other four accompanied the visitors upto the boundaries of their camp. By the time the four reached their own camp, day daily-light had broken. The three warriors went back to their respective tents and slept off.

But none of them could sleep. They were disturbed by the trumpeting of the elephants and neighing of the horses. There was also the bustle of things being shifted. Then there was the noise made by the whisperings and conversations of the common soldiers. Of course, their minds were highly disturbed. They slept as much as their beleaguered bodies allowed. Bhishma got up when the sun had risen to a height of four persons on each other. After hi[c] bath, he bathed and then offered the ritual respect to the Fire God thrice, using the material prepared by the priest. By the time he had finished it, the manager of supplies came to present a problem, "Grand-father, we had the water problem right from the start. Do you know the latest?"

He looked at him questioningly.

He explained, "All the soldiers were under the impression that the war would commence this morning. It is an unprecedented war. They were all talking about the rivers of blood that would flow and the mountains of dead bodies, broken bones and pulped flesh, that would be thereby the afternoon. The very idea scared them so much that most of them began to defecate a number of times in the night

itself, and all the water they had drunk began to be sweated out of their bodies. And urination on a large scale, too. They are still in the grip of loose motions and uncontrolled urination. The stench has already begun to tell, pervading the whole atmosphere. Unable to stand it, quite a few are losing their mental balance and shouting, 'we are dying'. The scare is spreading fast. Your tents are J a little apart from the main camp, and hence the stench has not yet reached you. Moreover the aroma of the ghee offered in ritual here may have countered the stench."

For a minute, the chief of the armies was silent. Then he said, "Are the panicking ones inexperienced green horns?"

Manager, "No sir. Maybe a handful could be raw. Right from yesterday when our armies started moving here, soldiers have been rushing one after another to climb the top of the trees over there to survey the scene. On our side we have an army that looks like a sea of endless soldiers. And out there they could see the armies of the enemy stretching endlessly beyond the horizon. Such huge armies, such big war, had never been seen or heard of. That impression has really scared them. Moreover they have been used so far to small-scale encounters in which small armies rush at each other and the result is produced in a relatively short while. Either you die or survive, either you win or lose. No long waiting, no expectation and anticipation. They had never before seen such a sea of soldiers. I, too, have never seen anything like this."

Again after pausing for a minute, Bhishma said, "Send the Maharaja and the Preceptor. See that the whole area is properly ' cleaned up."

Manager, "How much cleaning is feasible, especially when there is a scarcity of water?"

Bhishma merely uttered the words, "As much as possible." Then he turned to the ritual fire and fed some more ghee to it. The fire began to blaze. The gentle and pleasant aroma of the ghee slowly pervaded the space. He inhaled once lovingly the pleasant aroma. He felt that his age wouldn't permit him to climb the top of a tree and survey the spectacle. He just got up and sat in the front portion in the usual place. He did not feel the urge to take a round or survey the site of war.

After a brief interval, Duryodhana arrived with Drona. Drona sat in one of the seats. Duryodhana sat beside his grandfather. He spoke, "The Preceptor has told me everything. Well, I rule out the possibility of giving our men the option at this stage of leaving us and of going over to the enemy. If we accept the principle of total openness, the practice of telling everybody everything, how can we govern the

kingdom? Maybe we could govern. But it would be absolutely impossible to manage a war on those lines."

Bhishma, "It seems a large number of soldiers urinated and defecated from fear of the consequences of this unique and unprecedented war. Fear, I need not tell you, spreads like an epidemic. If we retain with us such fellows, they will infect and corrupt the rest. Therefore, it would be wise at this stage to ascertain who are scared and who have no mind for this war, and get rid of them. In a war, the greater danger than the enemy is the cowardice or reluctance of one's own army."

Duryodhana, "But isn't it the task of commanders to enthuse the unwilling or the scared?

Bhishma, somewhat petulantly, "Child, don't presume to teach me about duties and responsibilities. I have won more wars than you have had the opportunity to have seen."

Duryodhana, "That is why I had requested you to be the chief commander of our armies."

Bhishma, "That is why I am saying this to you. The person going to war must have a clear idea of why he is fighting it. If there is no inner commitment, how can physical courage arise? The same holds good for our enemies, too. They , too, should have a clear understanding why they are at war. Some of them from their side may come over to us, some from your side may go to them. When all this is sorted out, then we can start the war proper. Otherwise what guarantee is there that the half-hearted ones will not stab you in the back? That is why I am suggesting this. I have not lost a battle yet. And I may say you have never won any war waged by you."

Duryodhana, "Grandpa, your intention seems to be to humiliate me."

Bhishma, "A true Ksatriya must fight a war and then win." Passing his hand gently over Duryodhana's head, he added, "He must never loot by gambling."

At that juncture, Drona intervened, "If you accept the advice of grandfather, your chances of success in the war will be greater. Revered Bhishma, I told the same thing to the Maharaja. Had we not gone yesterday and hammered out those reasonable rules and terms of warfare, we would have met defeat certainly. According to the new rules, they cannot attack us until we have signalled to them that we are ready. They know undoubtedly that our soldiers were scared since yesterday night. Suppose they had attacked us this morning or yesterday night, the scare would have spread and made our men flee. Then they could have easily captured our chariots, horses,elephants

and weapons, and then chased us in our vulnerable state. Then within two days, they would have marched into Hastinavati as victors. Do you know that weeding out the unwilling would strengthen us?"

Bhishma stared hard at Duryodhana's face. He was in deep thought. Bhishma asked, "Do you want to answer our questions yourself or do you prefer to consult your advisers first? A king must be capable of thinking and deciding for himself. If you say 'No' to us, then it shall be the responsibility of your advisers to help you win the war. Look here, I am ready to return the chief commander's sword, the symbol of supreme authority over the conduct of the war."

Duryodhana thought a little, and then said, "All right. Since you are prepared to take the responsibility for winning the war, I agree to abide by your strategy."

Bhishma clapped for the sentry waiting outside. He asked him to get the functionaries who made public announcements on the back of an elephant. A little later, four of them arrived. Bhishma ordered them, "Announce this to all our soldiers. The Pandavas, born through the Niyoga system, do not belong to the Kuru lineage. It was an injustice even to have offered them Khandavaprastha. Maharaja Duryodhana regained in the game of dice what had been wrongly transferred to them in the first place. Now there is no need or justification for returning the territory to them. We did not want a war but they have taken the initiative in organising a massive expedition against us. All those who believe that it is their Dharma to defend the ancient Kuru lineage against these non-Kurus, fight on our side. Those who think that justice lies with the five Pandavas, can go to them. Those who do not want to get mixed up in this war, can go back to their places. All those who do not leave us before sunset tomorrow will be automatically taken to be on our side. The war will formally commence day after tomorrow precisely at sunrise. You four should go in all four directions to announce this message so that it is clearly heard by every soldier and every commanding officer."

Duryodhana, "Why such a long message?"

Bhishma, "This must be done." Then, turning to the four public announcers, "All right, you start your work forthwith." They left.

After some time, Duryodhana went out. He was on the point of visiting the tent of every commanding officer to pay his courtesies. It was then that he was called by his grand-father. After he left, Drona moved close to Bhishma and said, "Look here, according to my understanding of Dharma, these five must be counted as members of the Kuru lineage. But that does not mean that I will be going over to their side. Why? Two reasons. You know both. The first: the debt of

eating his rice. Two: My wrath against Drupada, the Pari cal a King, has not yet cooled off. Isn't the main army on the Pandava side, the army of the Pancalas?"

Bhishma, "Preceptor, you were born a Brahmin. But your occupation is archery. It is not a Brahmin quality to harbour a grudge against anyone after so many years. You are aware that it has been many years ago since he had humiliated you. He had been punished for it, and he had asked you to forgive him also. All this was over long ago... It is unlike a Brahmin to be so unforgiving and revengeful. Why not you turn yourself into a Ksatriya?"

Drona, "I believe that he boasts, saying, I am not Drupada if I don't have this Drona killed at the hands of my son Dhrishtadyumna. I shall have him humiliated by his own disciple, Arjuna.' Well, how can the fire taper off if it is fed frequently with ghee?"

Bhishma, "After all, one day or other this body will have to go. You can refuse to be provoked by the idea that, if the body has to go, what matters who destroys it — Drupada's son is as good as anybody else. Why not send him the rejoinder, Tf I have absolutely no enmity against you or your son, how can you get me killed?'

Drona, "You are advising me not to hate the Pancalas. Don't } you yourself have hatred against them?"

Bhishma, "I am a Ksatriya. Even if I have hatred, it is all right. But you are a Brahmin."

Drona just laughed. It was not the first time that Bhishma had got fun out of contrasting Drona's Brahmin birth and Ksatriya nature. And there was none with the stature and authority of Bhishma, who could take the liberty of being critical of him in a friendly and lighter vein. Drona enjoyed old Bhishma's banter. Drona asked Bhishma, "Mine is the obligation of haw ng been fed and the hostility towards Drupada. But you, as Dharmaraja said there, are the original sovereign of the whole kingdom. You have no causes such as I have, to fight on Duryodhana's side. Then why did you join his camp? Why did you agree to be his army chief? Has your faith in the legitimacy of the five Pandavas as members of your Kuru lineage collapsed "?

Bhishma, "Preceptor, I can assure you that, if my faith in their legitimacy collapses, I shall be guilty of violating the Dharma of the Aryas. As for the reason for my accepting the position of the army chief, I shall explain the matter to you some day later. Have you finished your rituals?"

Drona, "I got up very late in the morning. Duryodhana was there to see me. He said, 'Preceptor, there is no warrior matching you in bravery and prowess.' He said I could demolish thousands of

enemies with ease. You know, ever since the question of war has come up, he has been systematically courting my favour, showering me daily with extravagant adulation."

Bhishma, "You can now perform the rituals."

Drona left. Bhishma ordered the sentry to fetch his meal. Then he issued orders that none should be allowed to meet him. He then stretched to take rest. He yawned. He loosened up his body. Though he was sure that sleep wouldn't come, he closed his eyes. There were mosquitoes buzzing around his eyes and ears. He realised that for the last seventy years or so, he never had any occasion to sleep outside the palace. Of course, in the palace, it was very different. There the mosquito menace was countered by burning a mixture of sandalwood and neem. After such a long time, it was for the first time that he felt deprived of the comforts of palace life. It occurred to Bhishma that his grandson, Dharma, lived in the forest for twelve years in far worse conditions. He recalled Dharma's emaciated figure. He thought, his very name is Dharma, a name given to him by the Aryan sages. Bhishma reflected, "This fellow calls it Adharma or violation of Dharma, unwilling to part with his territory. All violations of Dharma arise from jealousy, egoism and pride. But it all comes down to the same thing — giving them the colour of Dharma and Karma, finding one hundred and eight justifications for them, and characterising the Arya Dharma as violation of Dharma, these are wretched times ..."Then the warrior rolled over and slept. But the thoughts ran on, "Has my conviction regarding the Pandava claim to be Kurus really collapsed?" As he was taking a deep breath, Bhishma could smell the stench - "The wind may be blowing from that direction." He laughed." The Ksatriya quality is fading out from the world." The stench was too much, and he closed his nose." Well, if I breathe less deeply, the stench will not affect my nostrils. The primary question is: the release of the water consumed, into urine and, not dripping sweat coming ou t of the body as one climbs on to a chariot and attacks the enemy by shooting a rain of arrows on him. No, that was not the question? Nothing like that. It was the sages who named him Dharma. It seems that title is questioned by many more, not just Duryodhana. Then aren't they my grand- children?" The drum of the announcer punctuated his reflection. Also the voice of the announcers. Bhishma heard the voice offer those not interested in the cause of the war to leave for their places. He wondered, "How many will return to their places? Suppose all of them go. No war. The triumph of Dharma. Dharma argued that I am under nobody's obligation. When the king owns everything, how can anyone claim exemption from all obligation to the king? How can I claim to be the ultimate source of kingdom and its sovereignty? It was because I didn't want the kingdom and sovereignty that I abjured everything! Now both call me their grand-father. Stupid fellow! Now how he

claims that they alone are my real grand-children! Stupid fellow, full of avarice!"The army of mosquitoes was becoming less concentrated on his body.

Slowly sleep overtook him, for a brief time, a sleep outside the domain of the mosquitoes and the stench.

When he woke up, he felt as if he had slept for about three hours. A thought which had first appeared during the sleep, now rose before his consciousness. He wanted to know how far Dvaipayana forest was from the camp. Then he thought, "It does not matter how far it is. I must go, resting in the chariot. Sage Krishna Dvaipayana lives with his disciples. He has by kinship rules, the status of a brother. He has always been my guide in matters concerning Dharma and Karma. I must consult him and return to the camp before tomorrow evening." He turned to one side. He couldn't sleep any more. Then he sat up quickly. He clapped for the sentry, and ordered him to go and tell the Maharaja to come to him.

After listening to Bhishma, Duryodhana said, "When we have to plunge into war day after tomorrow morning, what is the sense in the chief of the army running after some sage somewhere?"

Bhishma, "Not just any sage. He is the sage who donated his semen to produce your grandfather. When the Kuru lineage was about to die out, he saved it. Should not this army chief now go and get his blessings to win the war?"

Duryodhana did not speak. But he called for the manager, and asked him to get ready two chariots, each drawn by four horses. They started out, with ten men on horses. Duryodhana suggested that they should take a small army for security reasons. But Bhishma dissuaded the idea by saying, "When one visits sages and holy men, one should not take an army. Don't worry. I shall not be captured during the journey." Then he climbed into the first chariot, and sat relaxed against a soft pillow. The second chariot behind carried food and other provisions. As he proceeded southward from the Kaurava camp, they could see to their left a portion of their own army. In the distance, the elephants were enjoying the trunks and branches of trees, which they were merrily wrenching. They could see one of the announcers on the elephant proclaiming the message. Bhishma had nothing else on his mind excepting the issue of Dharma — were the Pandavas legitimate members of the Kuru lineage? If Duryodhana had simply argued that he would not give back the territory to his kin-rivals, he wouldn't have worried. That would have been in conformity with the ways of the world. No, the real worry was that he had raised a fundamental issue of Dharma. He was claiming to fight in the cause of Dharma. If his interpretation of Dharma was right, then Bhishma's faith in the rightness and justice of the Pandava

claim would not only be a clear violation of Dharma. But much worse, it would amount to a total collapse of his own life, his achievements and his ideals. He was not so much concerned with the questions of Pandava defeat or victory, or the survival of mankind itself, in view of the massive armies involved, as the question of whether his whole life has been a total failure in terms of its own ideals. He regretted bitterly that he did not, like Krishna Dvaipayana, follow fully the life of a mendicant sage in a forest, Instead he thought he had accepted a more complex fate of being neither here nor there, neither a full householder nor a full recluse. He stretched his legs and relaxed. There was a path leading to the Dvaipayana forest. On either side of it, there were occasional patches of cultivated land. Between were dense forest areas. Though he was sitting on a soft seat, he found the motion of the chariot very unsteady and unsettling. The wobbly movement seemed to underscore the vulnerability of his ageing body, a vulnerability which he had never felt till now, without the comforts of a palace life. He meditated on his body, "How old is this body? Living so long I have lost count of the years, their arrivals and departures. This ancient body is so old as to be called immortal." As his memory went beck to old age, less old age and the beginning of old age, it seemed to him that his life consisted mostly of middle age and old age, and very little of boyhood and youth. If one were to unwind the thread of memory and go back, how far back could memory take one? Bhishma asked himself: "How can one remember the time when one was a baby urinating and defecating on one's mother's laps, when one hardly possessed then any intelligence to appropriate consciously one's experience? Doesn't the faculty to store experience in memory begin only after one has attained the ability to sleep away from one's mother? It seems I never had the good fortune to sleep on a mother's lap. How much I hated mother as a young boy! What sort of mother can she be who cut off all ties with the baby she had delivered out of her womb and gone off to her natal home! Couldn't my father get an Aryan bride? He preferred non-Aryan women to the long and thin nosed, night-eyed, tall and fair-skinned Aryan beauties. In fact, both his wives were non-Aryans. God knows what he found in these uncultivated, forest-bred tribal women?" Of course, Bhishma was aware that as a celibate he had acquired knowledge about women second-hand. Naturally, he had no direct experience of them. Even that knowledge was very limited as he had no time for such things, being pre-occupied with the affairs of government. He asked himself, "Who will discuss women with me, who was known to have contempt for women? Father married first Ganga, who was my mother. My step-mother used to call me till her last breath, Ganga's son. Now this Krishna Dvaipayana is a cousin. Only he who has attained the status of a sage calls me Ganga's son, but everybody else calls me Bhishma. My orignal name has vanished from the world.

Even I get the feeling that Devavrata is not my name, but some stranger's. Father was a youth who used to hunt in the forests from the river Ganga to the foot of the Himalayan mountains. He had a big build, like mine. She was a lass from a hill tribe, and she was called Ganga. When approached by him, she had said, 'King, I, too, am in love with you. But our customs and codes and rituals are not the same.' With the impulsiveness of youth, he dismissed her objection. But she explained further, 'No, let me make it clear. With our people, all the children born to a daughter belong to her mother. But you have a different practice. With you, they are the property of the husband. I shall go with you. But only on condition that I must be allowed to follow the custom of my people. You must allow me to send away the children born to us to my mother's home. Are you agreeable to this?' My father, blinded by passion, answered, 'Lovely lady, I want you, not the children.' Then she clinched the issue by demanding, 'The moment you even attempt to establish your authority over the children born to us, I warn you, that our relationship will automatically terminate.' That was the strict condition on which my mother came with my father."

Do the children belong to the . other or the father? This question bothered Bhishma. He who was relaxing in the shaking chariot, suddenly sat up. His eyes caught the trees shedding dry leaves... In front, five men on horses. Behind, another chariot, and behind it five more men on horses. The noise of the wheels grating on the dry leaves and hoofs of the horses on the ground. He asked himself, "Do they belong to father or mother? To the seed or the soil? It seems this question never even occurred to father, intoxicated with his love. His focus was narrowed down to himself and the woman he had loved. She conceived, she was off to her natal home for the delivery. Why should she go to her natal home for delivery. She delivered the child, recouped herself, and returned to her husband's home without the child. Again loving. Conception. Delivery and recovery at the natal home. Again returning to her husband without the child. This went on till seven children were born, and in a span of twelve to fourteen years. The king who was all these years busy in this activity, woke up at last to his duties as a king. He also found that he was getting on in years. He was worried about a successor. Bhishma explored his own mind, "Well, then I used to think that was the problem. Not as an heir-apparent, but what father desired. Wouldn't he like to lift, play with, fondle, and love the fruit of his own seed? She told him, 'Then you go with me to my mother's home, and live there. You get the children to play with to your heart's content." Father replied spiritedly, 'I am an Aryan, and I cannot demean myself by living as a bonded labourer in a mother-in-law's household. Moreover, I am a king.' She countered him, 'Didn't I come away with you only after you agreed that I should be allowed to follow the custom of our

people, which is different from that of your people?' He pleaded, 'For your husband's sake, give up your custom.' She was adamant. She asserted, 'To sacrifice everything for a husband, is your custom. Why should I follow it? Well, I want to know whether children belong to the seed or the soil? 'The question that did not worry him in the prime of age now began to worry him. He argued, T am an Arya. Children belong to the seed, not the soil.' Equally strongly, she maintained, T am from the hills. My community lives according to a different code. Who can say which bird picks up which seed from where and plants it? It is the belly that carries the seed and conceives the child, that has the claim to it. The off-spring '= mine, and I belong to my mother. I do not want to go by your customs. Among our people, you simply cannot force a woman as you will.' She was stubborn like a rock, but he, a king, was not prepared to brook any opposition, and also she was now living in his town. It was a contest of wills. He gave his final order, 'The delivery will be here this time. I shall not send you to your mother's home.' She wept, screamed and abused, all in vain. The eighth delivery took place in the husband's home. The king placed guards to watch the baby. One fine morning, she vanished, abandoning the baby that had taken seed, grown and come out of her womb. Father did not bother to search for her. But even if he had tried, would she have returned?" Then he sat leaning against the same pillow, dangling his legs in the chariot. It was drawn by powerful horses. The horses from the Gandhara, Bahlika and Sindhu countries were real horses. There was no shortage of well-bred horses after the kinship was forged with Jayadratha by offering Dussale in marriage to him. He wondered why they had never really mastered the science of horse-breeding. Then he closed his sunken eyes, and swayed with the shaking carriage." As a boy, how my mother's memory tormented me! What a stone-hearted mother she must have been to desert her own child! Well, the servant-maids,father and I cursed her, saying that she was not a woman at all. Now when I think back, it occurs to me that she was totally devoid of maternal instincts. The first seven children, all sons, she would leave behind in her mother's home, and then return to father. Then she abandoned me to the care of my father. How can she be called a mother? I learnt about this custom among the Himalayan tribal people when I had gone there to wage some war of victory. I was then fifty. It seems the custom was to deliver and hand over the child to the natal home. Then also I recall my mind was at a low ebb. I also recall that, while warring in that mountainous region, I had the illusion that any tall fellow I encountered was one of my seven brothers! I then realised that of all our illusions, the one surrounding our origin and birth is the deepest.

Yes, mother left us. But father's love and affection for me were virtually limitless. No doubt there were a bevy of nurses to look after

me, but, to tell the truth, it was father who really brought me up, nursing me, nurturing me, most tenderly. That is why the servant-maids in the palace nick-named me a child nurtured by a man. And how early in life I mastered archery, hunting and warfare. I never knew what fear was. Why did father who had always kept company with me to alleviate my motherless loneliness and put me on the throne at a very young age, suddenly go crazy after a woman in his old age?That, too, over a fisherman's daughter! Her name itself was Kali or Black. She was dark complexioned. And father had a gigantic physique, my height. A typical Aryan, Aryan skin and Aryan stance. Not surprising that he was passionately in love in his old age. His first love was for a lass from the mountain tribe, and this time for a girl from the fishing community. 11 passes my comprehension what these Aryan men find in women from the lower castes! They chase them when at war, when hunting and even when there is peace and no activity." Bhishma began to polish his memory till it gave out bright light. It gave him the same story, the same old things repeated. He reflected, "Is this right or wrong? I am not clear. Well, after all, I am a bachelor, and perhaps these are matters beyond my ken." Then he looked out of the chariot which was kicking dust. Then he became reflective, "The Aryans have seized land everywhere relentlessly and turned them into agricultural tract. They began to settle everywhere. All of a sudden, father took ill, and became bed-ridden. No amount of medical treatment seemed to work. At last I got to know the secret of the illness through his charioteer. The charioteer is the closest person to his master. He knows everything about his master's movements as well as his inner secrets. Therefore when I pressed him, he revealed, 'Prince, your father is afflicted with a mental disease. The other day we had gone south for hunting. We had to cross the river Yamuna. The ferry was rowed by a girl. When I say a girl, I mean actually a young woman of twenty-five or twenty-six years. Your father has lost his head over that woman. Your father tried to attract her by saying he would offer her any gift she wanted. She replied, 'Oh, king, if you marry me, I shall be all yours.' Then she took him to her father. Her father was the chief of the fishing community. He appeared to be a very practical sort of fellow. After tactfully extracting all the information in detail, he told the master, "Maharaja, you already have a son who has come of age, and you are also growing into an old man, like me. What shall my daughter gain by marrying you?' Your father answered, What will she gain? Well, she will gain a life in the palace, plenty of jewellery and luxurious life.' The chief of fishermen countered, 'My daughter is not prepared to be a servant of her step-son's wife, and I shall offer her to you, only on condition that you and your son swear by the sacred fire that the son born to my daughter shall ascend your throne, or else we shall have nothing to do with you.' Your father left them abruptly and climbed into the chariot. He asked me to hurry home. His infatuation for her has not

subsided. But it would be embarrassing for him to ask you to give up your throne. Moreover he has great love for you. Didn't he bring you up as if he was both father and mother to you?'

"Well, I went with the charioteer to the chief of the fisher-men and his daughter. How many years ago was it? I see my memory take me back in years. How many? Maybe a hundred. I was then twenty-two, and father was sixty, almost. I cannot recollect precisely the emotions that occupied my mind during the journey to the fisher-man chief and his daughter. This is odd." Then Bhishma adjusted the position of his legs, and relaxed by cushioning his right arm on a pillow. He thought to himself, "How stiff and straight-backed I would sit always on a horse or in a chariot! It had never been my habit to bend like this. Was I filled with the desire to re-pay father's love and care in bringing me up? Or was it the enthusiasm to procure the medicine recommended for my father lying sick on the bed, no matter where it was located and what the risk involved in reaching it? Well, right now I have forgotten what made things happen then. When I and the charioteer reached the spot, she was engaged in rowing the ferry. She was dark in complexion. Her muscles, soaked in water and baked in the sun, were strong, and so were her knees, thighs, arms and full-blown breasts. The charioteer identified her for me, and then I still remember I wondered with a trace of contempt how' father could have taken a fancy to such a woman. My negative reaction was reinforced by the smell of fish hitting my nostrils as I sat close to her, in her father's hut - or was it a house? - on the other bank of the river, as well as by her wrinkled face. Well, I can't remember the details. How over-polite her father was when he seated me on a platform, bowed, and then prostrated before me! I think generosity bursts forth when one is at the height of one's virility, courage and prowess. From that day to this, my experience has taught me this truth. The persons below one's status fall at one's feet, and flatter one, saying, I am the slave, and you, my master,' and then rob you of things one by one in the guise of begging charity.

"After seating me on a soft mattress of dried elephant grass, and as my nose was being assailed by the stench of fish, her father stood, bending his head, and saluted. Then he went directly to the heart of the matter, 'Prince, your arrival to this poor man's house has blessed it and brought it prosperity. Your father has expressed an overwhelming desire to take my daughter for a wife. I notice only one snag in it. You see, you are capable of subjugating any enemy, no matter how powerful.' I was puzzled, and asked, 'How does it become a snag? Tell me, Nishada'. He replied, 'Well, if tomorrow you exercise your extraordinary prowess to deprive my daughter of the kingdom, what can this poor man's daughter do?' I answered, 'All right, the son born to your daughter alone will be heir to father's throne. I shall from this very moment renounce all kingdom. This is my vow.' He

bowed to me, happy and admiring, ‘One should be blessed with a son like you. I did not have the good fortune to have a son like that.’ He sang my praise, smothering me with flattering words. Then once again he bent from waist down respectfully and said, ‘Please clear one last doubt of mine. I am a poor man. Please don’t get angry because I put matters bluntly and in detail. If you get angry, I am aware that that will be the end of my life.’

I said, ‘Have no fear and speak out.’

He, ‘Yes, you have rejected the kingdom. Even if the whole world makes a somersault, I am sure that you will never go back on your word. But how can your vow bind your children? You are now of a marriageable age. My daughter’s children and your children will be approximately of the same age. Wouldn’t this situation create complications later?’

I, ‘How can my children demand what I forbid them to do?’

He, ‘Do you think these are days when children obey their parents? Of course, it would be another matter if you didn’t have any children. How can, in any case, one predict accurately the behaviour of the unborn progeny? And, good sir, you are all big folk. I am afraid of giving my daughter to a big family. And I do not want her to suffer later. Please tell your father to find some other woman for a wife.’

I proclaimed, ‘Nishada, I am taking this great vow for the sake of my father: I shall remain a perpetual bachelor, and take the vow of celibacy. I also swear never to become a king. So, set aside your fear and suspicion. Please send you r daughter with me.’ How these words poured spontaneously out of my mouth!

"At that time I did not chew and digest the situation in which I said these words. As I took her in the chariot, the stench of fish also accompanied me. I was all enthusiasm to carry this medicine, which had no knowledge of royal etiquette, the only medicine that could cure father’s illness! A father who had brought me up with such solicitude. And a mother who had borne me and thereafter just disappeared. God knows where she was after twenty-two years, I then thought. When I went back with the medicine, father’s face was full of joy. Also blushing. He looked at her. Then he bowed his head down when he tried to look at me. Later, after a year, he touched my shoulders and said, ‘What a terrible (Bhishma) vow you took! Take the army and win some other kingdom. Be its king. Leave this place and its affairs. I shall persuade her and her father to release you from the vow to remain a celibate. Then you can marry.’

"But by then my mind and heart had arrived at the irrevocable decision, that I should remain a celibate for life. My name changed from the original Devavrata to the newly achieved name, Bhishma.

Now who knows who is or was Devavrata? If when someone were to try to wake me from sleep by shouting ‘Devavrata’, I myself certainly wouldn’t respond. Well, Devavrata vanished, and Bhishma remained permanently. Devavrata was sacrificed on the platform of a fisherman’s hut. It was much later that I realised that the unsophisticated, illiterate fishermen, had beaten hollow this warrior in cunning and verbal dexterity."

On the way there was a small stream running across the path. The horse-men made their animals drink water without getting off them, and then proceeded further. The water was deep enough to have the wheels of the chariots half-immersed. The horses harnessed to the chariots bent down to drink water. The charioteer said, ‘Grand-pa, I want to change horses. Will you please take rest for a while?’ "Seeing the water reminded me of the situation back in our camp. Perhaps the stench of human faeces and urine has diminished! After the whole place is thoroughly washed and cleaned, the stench may totally disappear, and by that time the cowardly and the uninterested will have left." Bhishma got down and walked away to urinate. Then he returned, and washed his feet to cleanse the impurity accrued in urinating. Then he put some water in to his mouth, and spat it out. And after that he returned to his seat in the chariot. He asked the charioteer, ‘How much more distance have we to cover?’ His charioteer, Sukesha, said, ‘We have been driving fast. Another three to four hours. I know the route very well. There is enough fodder for the horses. Even after sun-set, there will be mild moon-light. Isn’t the grand-pa tired?’

Bhishma, 'No. I never felt the distance.’

Sukesha, I don’t want to boast. But I must say that when I get into the saddle no horse would try to get out of control, would maintain even tenor and pace, and terrific speed.’

Bhishma thought to himself, "It is the way of meh of lower status and caste to offer their girls in marriage to more affluent and upper caste households, and then grasp power and authority. That was exactly what Nishada had done. Well, gradually he managed to establish himself in our household, following his daughter. Soon I found myself deprived of all authority. And my mind became a bundle of contempt, anger, asceticism, and other emotions I can’t now recall! Father was completely drowned in his infatuation for her. She had a child. By then father had begun to realise and rue his folly. That led to a mental disease. I myself kept generally away from the domestic scene, immersing myself in the study of the Vedas. I had made up my mind to reject worldly concerns, and concentrate on the world beyond. I and father seldom saw each other. I myself was not at all keen on meeting him. She bore a second child. Then soon after

father died. I do not know to this day whether he died because of mental illness or over-indulgence in sex in old age. I have utter contempt for women. And I saw women through my experience of the women I knew—my own mother, the mother who bore me, and abandoned me, and the step-mother who caused father's death. Well, all that strengthened me in my decision to be celibate.

"Damn it! Today I keep on remembering the same wretched things and I hate it. Are there no other items to fill my mind?" Then he touched his head once. These things had happened a hundred years ago, but the day after the next was the war. Bhishma thought, "I must return to the camp by tomorrow evening. Well, it would tire me, this hurrying up and down. I just felt like asking the advice of Krishna Dvaipayana, and rushed out impulsively. May be if I had devoted my life to the study of the Vedas, I, too, might have turned out to be like Krishna Dvaipayana. But I fell into the trap of the householder's life. Even after father's death, I kept away for fourteen years. There it is, the wretched memory of the same wretched things." Once again he shook his head. Cast his sunken eyes around and saw the evening spreading. But not yet, and the trees and bushes and bowers turning red, splashed by sun's dying rays. On the dried leaves, strewn on the road, the grating of the horses' hooves. Bhishma was absorbed in the scene for a while. Then all of a sudden, he laughed, and the charioteer turned back to see what was happening. Then realising that he shouldn't have done it, he turned his head back again.

But memory wouldn't let him alone." She was called Kali, but what did they call her in their own language? It was I who first called her the fish-smelling woman, Matsyagandhi. And that, too, in the presence of the charioteer. That name reached the nostrils of everybody in the palace. Embarrassed by it, she began to smart her body with all kinds of pastes - sandal, civet and frankincense - to kill the stench of the fish she was born with. And this was worse, other pungent smells hitting our nostrils. Well, an uncultured person will never know the limits of ornamentation and dressing. This earned her the other name, Yojanagandhi, though father had named her Satyavati at the time of the marriage. After father's death, why, even when he was alive, when her father, fisher-man, ruled the kingdom virtually, the dignity of the kingdom was lost. The subjects defied authority, and did not fear the ruler. The king's coffers became empty because nobody paid any taxes or tributes. I was told that my name was frequently used to scare the public.

"How many years after father's death had the sage Parasara arrived at our town with this Krishna Dvaipayana? Memory did not help. God knows how many years. The sage had come to show the child to his mother. Later I gathered some more information. In fact, my step-mother herself told me. It seems she was then a sixteen-year

old girl, ferrying people across the river. Once the sage Parasara had chanced to be there, and wanted to be ferried across the river. As the great sage watched this buxom girl, vigorously rowing with the oar and displaying the wealth of her body, he found her charms irresistible. He said to her, 'Girl, I am excited by your beauty, and your flesh has set my flesh on fire. Come with me straight-away, and let me take you'. Then she took the boat back to the bank, anchored it by tethering it to the root of a tree. They revelled in each other's body right there on the floor of the boat. The sage spent a few days in her company, and impregnated her. After achieving this, he just said farewell to her and left as if nothing had happened. But he had hinted that he would return later. Her father and mother looked after the pregnant daughter with love and care. A son was born. This made all the three happy. One day Parasara returned, and demanded, "The child belongs to me. Give him to me, and I shall take him with me.' Her father replied, 'No, I refuse to part with him. You have merely sowed the seed and procreated him, and you did not marry her.' The sage argued, 'What if we didn't many'? The seed is mine, and hence the child is mine. If you do not surrender him, I shall invoke curse on you'. Well, the child was still breast-feeding, and they were reluctant to separate the child from its mother at that stage. I must say that these fisher folk are better than the hill people, and show greater attachment to off-spring. They were also worried about the great sage's ability to bring up the child. They arrived at a compromise. The sage said, 'All right, you can take care of him till he is eight years old. When he attains that age I shall return to take him away so that I can instruct him in the highest wisdom after initiating him as a Brahmin through the thread-wearing ceremony.' As agreed, he returned after eight years and took away the weeping boy with him. The boy was like his mother, dark in complexion. Hence the boy was named Krishna, the Dark one. And he named the boy thus then and there itself- Naturally, the fisher-man became enraged. He warned his daughter, 'Remember. No matter who touches you and wants you, tell them they cannot go any further without first meeting me. These strangers come, sow their seeds, and without marrying grab the harvest. And the soil that conceives and nourishes the seeding in its womb is left empty, to live the pangs of separation, sorrow and the stain.' J t was because of this warning which she had taken seriously to heart that my father had to pay the penalty. He could have had her without marrying her, as did the sage.

"How old was Krishna Dvaipayana when he was first brought to Hastinavati? My memory is not clear on this. Twelve or thirteen?

So young, and how easily and perfectly he used to recite the Vedas! He had committed even by that age to memory vast portions from the Vedas. He had also grasped the meaning and implications of some of them. His father had put him through a sound education,

and thus justified his act of taking the boy away. Parasara remained in the palace for some time. His son's mother had been widowed only a year earlier. And she had two little children. He showed no interest in her company. And she was equally indifferent. Our servants told me this though at that time I was not interested in that matter. I believe the son prostrated before the mother with devotion. Krishna Dvaipayana continued his devotion to his mother till her end. Even now when he remembers her, he bows down his head in respect.

"I remember now that Parasara who heard about my devoting myself to the study of the Vedas living in a hut on the other bank of the river Ganga, took the trouble to visit me. He said to me, In recent days, the Ksatriyas have abandoned Vedic studies. Bhishma, you have anyway taken the vow of celibacy. Why not you just become a Brahmin. When your father became a ruler, didn't his younger brother, Devapi, become a member of the Bhargava lineage and join Arshtishena family of that lineage? Now your younger brother will ascend the throne, and you go with me and become a Brahmin.' Why didn't I heed Parasara's words? Had I then become a Brahmin, I would have been spared the bondage to domestic duties and responsibilities in Hastinavati. Though a celibate, I couldn't escape the problems of a householder.

"If Parasara had not taken him away, Krishna would have come with his mother to our household and become my father's son and my brother. Now, of course, we are cousins. It is only more recently that the Ksatriyas have started to avoid marrying brides with children born out of wedlock. But in those days, things were different. How fast the world changes. If this is the case, then what will happen to our ancient Dharma, the Sanatana Dharma!" This thought began to torment him. He remembered that when he had asked the sage Parasara, "'Great sage, why did you take away the boy and not leave him with his mother?' Parasara's answer was, 'First, it is my child. Grown out of my seed. Therefore, there is no question of her claiming it. Two, if I had left him with her, he would have grown up as a fisherman. Now see how soon he has become a Vedic scholar. He will later grow into a great Vedic seer and scholar. Three, it is true that my mingling with her first was born out of my carnal urge. But do you know why I stayed on till she became pregnant? Because I was keen on a son who could carry forward and keep alive the tradition of Vedic lore I had built up. I took it as fortuitous that nature had chosen for me the soil in which I was to sow my seed/ "Bhishma thought, "His words are true. There is no Vedic scholar and expert even faintly comparable to Krishna Dvaipayana. Who knows but I, too, might have attained the level of Krishna Dvaipayana, if I had accepted the advice to become a Brahmin!"The thought made him unhappy. His mind was filled with the picture of Krishna Dvaipayana. He became emotionally moved by the picture. What

charisma! What knowledge and wisdom!. All in that dark complexioned body! He saluted the sage inwardly. He reflected further, "Yes, Parasara is right. The harvest is always from the seed. Hence it always belongs to the seed. Otherwise this child should have turned out to be a fisherman.." But then from within a doubt assailed him. If the child takes the dark complexion from its mother, then how can it be entirely owned by the seed?

It was already night. The road before was indistinct in the moon-light. Two horse-men at the front held torches dipped in oil to show the way. Bhishma asked the charioteer, Ts the road clearly visible?' The charioteer replied, 'Yes, grand-pa. It is clearly visible. Moreover I am very familiar with this route.' Then he got up from his seat, covered Bhishma with a wool blanket and returned to his seat. He did this because he was aware that the chilly wind rushed into the chariot as it sped fast. Once again the memory of Krishna Dvaipayana gripped him. He began to feel sorry that he did not then choose to become a Brahmin, and devote his whole life to the attainment of spiritual life and liberation from wordly bondage. He thought, "I was living there in the hut virtually leading the life of a Brahmin. I had cut off connection with the palace and its mental worries. The river lay between me and the life in palace. Not once did I then remember the boat. It was fourteen years after father's death. During my absence, it seems Satyavati's elder son, Chitrangada, was killed by a Gandharva. The second son, Vichitraveerya, was then a boy of thirteen. My step-mother came to me, accompanied by her sick and weeping son. Then she touched the ground and said, 'Bhishma, I am your mother. Yet I am bowing down before you. Please turn this side and see.'

"From the earliest age I never had any sense of devotion and respect for a mother. How could it now arise for this woman? But I had studied the Vedas. How could I refuse to anyone begging for something, especially if it was a woman? It was a tale of woe she narrated. 'A Gandharava invited your younger brother Chitrangada to a duel and killed him within a minute. This happened only a few days back. The ritual water has yet to be offered to him. It seems that the Gandharva has annexed the northern portions of our kingdom. He is believed to be ready to invade Hastinavati in another two days. Now who can save us excepting you? Who can go to your younger brother's aid in this critical time?' She asked her sick son to fall at my feet!

I said, 'What can I, a celibate who has vowed to renounce all political aspiration, do now?'

Mother, 'Then the kingdom built over the years by your father, grand-father, great-grand-father and a hundred generations back,

will now come under the control of tribal people from the hills. I am a mere woman. What can I do? Your father, too, is not there. This boy does no t know even fishing. Now I must teach him fishing and show him an alternative livelihood.'

I, 'I shall assume full responsibility for maintaining you and your son.'

She, 'I haven't come here just for that. Maybe you are not enamoured of this kingdom. Now even I have lost interest in it. Listen to me. I am telling you the truth. Now I have come to realise that a person who can handle two boats and four nets, will be utterly helpless when asked to rule a kingdom. I have no longer any desire to rule. But it has been now nineteen years since I married your father and joined your household. I lived with him as a wife for three years. Therefore, I am determined that this kingdom should not be allowed to go to the dogs. If we don't save it, then we will be doing injustice to the memory of your father and a whole lot of your great ancestors. That is why I have come to you begging on my knees. If this fisher-woman feels so strongly about the kingdom, don't you feel any sense of duty, you who were born to your father's semen and grew up into a redoubtable warrior?'

"When did she pick up all this talk about Dharma, and all this logic? In the first few days of her life in the palace, I had watched carefully her behaviour and character. J had felt disgusted with her. I had laughed within-myself at her. But now she appeared to have become cultured. By flinging at me the challenge of Dharma, of duty and of ancestral debt, she made it appear as if I was a primitive and uncultured person whereas she was a highly cultured one. Somewhere in my mind, in some corner, anger smouldered. I was also happy I felt a sense of satisfaction. Fear left me.

I, 'I shall give my reply tomorrow. Now you can go.'

She, 'If by tomorrow Hastinavati is captured by the Gandharva?'

"Can anything be more embarrassing than being begged for help by a woman? Moreover I have always felt hostility for the Gandharva people. Not only hostility but anger, contempt. Aren't they one of the groups among the hill tribes who were responsible for my birth? I stood up, saying, 'Proceed. I am following you. I shall return after defending Hastinavati.' When the boat-man was ferrying me back, I stood at one end of the boat. She stood in the middle. That boy, she reminded me that his name was Vichitraveerya, huddled against his mother's legs in fear.

"The news of my return to the palace spread like wild fire all over the town. They were happy about the return of Santanu's brave warrior son. I was also respected as one who had accepted a life of

celibacy. And I had returned after a long absence of fourteen years. Endless crowds gathered to see me and welcome me. I found that the kingdom had no armed forces worth the name. I sent messengers to villages to locate dispersed soldiers and report to me. The headmen of the villages were asked to do this job. I, too, had virtually forgotten my archery. I practised and trained them. Well, we got ready for the enemy. But the Gandharva did not dare attack us. Soon we got the news from the northern part which had been invaded and occupied, that he had fled. I myself went to the north with the newly organised army. Learning from the local people about the Gandharva's land, we invaded it, surrounded him and waged a bitter battle. Believe me, fighting in the mountains with people used to mountains is no joke. It is the toughest kind of battle one can imagine. As we climbed the heights, our breath became hard often. And one got tired very easily. Eventually, he died in the battle. The honour and reputation of the Kuru lineage were saved. I returned to the capital and informed my step-mother about killing the Gandharva, and the same night I ferried back to my hermit's hut, having successfully re-paid my debt to the ancestors.

"The following morning she came to see me with her son. She said to me, 'Bhishma, may you be immortal. Since I consider myself an Aryan and you my son, I am blessing you. You saved the kingdom, but you returned to this place of seclusion. But who can manage and rule that kingdom you have saved? I am fully aware of your commitments and vow. Therefore, far be it from me to suggest that you sit directly under the white umbrella and break your vow. But all I ask is that you support this boy, be near him and enable him to carry on. After this boy is able to stand on his own feet, you can return to this place, if you still wish it. If you can accept this much of responsibility, your outstanding success in driving away that Gandharva will have real point and meaning.'

"For one who had abandoned the entanglements of administration and the affairs of the kingdom, they once again became inevitable. Once back in the saddle, I could assess the situation that had developed in the fields of administration and public policy during my long absence. Remember that old fisherman who entered the palace and became the virtual ruler? Well, he had entered through the back-door as a father-in-law. The infatuated father fell sick and took to the bed. Then he died. Slowly, the maladministration of the father-in-law began. When an unworthy person occupies an office of the highest order, not only that office but all other institutions under its jurisdiction begin to rot. At first, aware of his unworthiness, he used to be very polite to people. Gradually, he turned into a bully and tyrant. People lost all their faith in the government. In fact, the people were so fed up with his rule that they were prepared to welcome any alternative, even an outsider who could liberate them

from this wicked fellow. That was how it seems the Gandharva annexed the northern portions, with public acquiescence. It appears his grand-son Chitrangada had been trained by this grandfather. When that boy, who couldn't distinguish between dignity and arrogance, became twelve years old, the grandfather died. I had made my home right across the river on the opposite bank, totally immersed in my studies, utterly indifferent to, and ignorant of, the goings on in the kingdom of my ancestors. The boy ascended the throne. The son of the fisher-woman, Kali, became the king. The hopes of the fisher-man came to fruition. His daughter's aspirations came to be fulfilled. No youth in the kingdom volunteered to join the army. Ours is a land known for its great scholars and seers. When they saw that things could get only from bad to worse under the misrule of fisher-man's grand- son, many people left the kingdom for neighbouring lands, mostly to Panchala, as immigrants. The revenues of the kingdom were in a mess, as no taxes were paid. The situation had reached such levels of degradation that the king had to go himself personally on horse-back to collect revenue. After abusing the household, he was offered a few fistfuls of grain as if he was a beggar. When this fellow went to fight the Gandharva in the north, the Gandharva had asked, 'Who may you be?'

He answered, 'Maharaja Chitrangada.'

'Is not this the territory of Maharaja Chitrangada?" The other man had asked.

'Yes'

Gandharva, 'Chitrangada is my name. That means this is my territory, according to your own statement.'

He 'You fellow, my name is Chitrangada.'

Gandharva, 'Look here. People have been calling me Chitrangada for the last forty years. And for how long have you been known by that name?'

He, 'For the last seventeen years.'

Gandharva, 'Now tell me, who has had it for a longer time ? I was first given that name. Your father stole it from me and then gave it to you. First you get back to your mother and return with a changed name. Then we shall see what can be done.'

"As this great occupier of the throne was befuddled, unable to answer the Gandharva, his own subjects who were there laughed so much that their ribs began to ache. A little later when the Gandharva rushed at Chitrangada and sliced off his neck, the so-called soldiers of his army fled in fright, seeking the refuge of trees and boulders. The people gave a deep sigh of relief!"

The trees became sparse and the empty plains began. A chilly wind blew into the chariot. Bhishma covered himself securely with the blanket. The charioteer asked, ‘Grand-pa, shall I cover you with another blanket?’ The old warrior replied, ‘No. Even this blanket feels heavy on the body.’ Then he used the edge of the blanket as a pillow and stretched himself. The road was rough and the chariot wobbled violently. Apparently the road had not been maintained well. He wondered whether it was right to neglect so badly the roads leading to the forests where sages and seers performed penance. Then he sat up. After a while, the plains changed to forest land, as the chariot cut through its way amidst tall trees, in the light cast by the torches. This part of the route appeared to be warmer. Bhishma recalled how much he had done to restore the kingdom to normality! Memory once again caught him in its grip. The whole past swept before his eyes. He thought, "It is not really difficult to gather taxes from the people. Persons of probity and competence could be recruited, trained and put in office. Even I who had been an heir-apparent when I was twenty-five, knew hardly anything about administration. I had to do everything anew, on my own. The tax collected has to be properly spent to the satisfaction and approval of the subjects. Every king has the illusion that his subjects are full of appreciation for him. But the real test of public acceptance and appreciation comes only when the kingdom is attacked by a powerful enemy. He must create opportunities for the return of scholars and other experts who have gone in to exile. And employ their relatives to persuade them to return. All this requires power, and more than power, sensitivity.

Meanwhile, I had to educate and train that boy, Vichitraveerya. The difficulty was not merely one of turning him into a cultured creature. He had to be transformed into a Ksatriya. Hadn’t it been a Himalayan labour?" Just then the chariot convulsed violently. It seemed to break the bones in the body. Old bones. The charioteer,slowed down. But it didn’t help, as the road itself was terrible. Bhishma thought that the skill of the charioteer was no match against the badness of the road. He just cast his eyes around at the giant trees that stood there, and heard the winds moan through their thick foliage.

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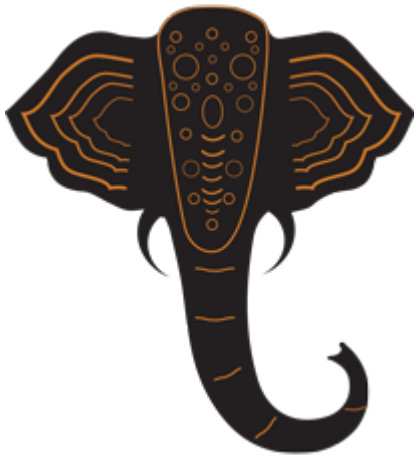
PART TEN



Chapter

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AS soon as they heard the drums mounted on the elephants' back, the soldiers stopped talking and tuned their ears to hear the expected message. The oxen that pulled great loads, and the horses and elephants used in the combat, did not display the enthusiasm; fear and angry screaming characterised the soldiers. Now they turned their attention to the message to be given. Those who couldn't hear fully or grasp clearly the implications of the message, took the help of others. The message was "Pandavas were not born to their father. Hence they do not belong to the Kaurava lineage. Therefore, Maharaja Duryodhana has refused to give them kingdom. Those who accept this stand can stay behind and fight on his side. Those who do not agree are free to go over to the enemy side or to go home ". At once, the message lightened the hearts of the soldiers but it also threw them into confusion. Those who were full of excitement at the prospect of the battle, felt disappointed, and those who were not enthusiastic about the war, felt as if some fever had left their bodies. But those frustrated felt consoled by the interpretation offered by friends, "It does not mean what you think of it. It only means that those who do not desire to fight, may leave." But, the message did block their zest for the war.

The soldiers of the infantry marching behind rows of horse-drawn chariots; did not hear the announcement at all. Not having been supplied water and food, they were busy abusing the more fortunate men belonging to the cavalry and the chariots. They felt wholly neglected. In all wars, it was the same. While they were bemoaning their fate, some who had gone to urinate or defecate, and had returned via the cavalry lines brought the message delivered by the drummer-messenger. The news made them happy. They passed on the news to those by their side. All the two hundred in that group got the message.

One soldier who was rubbing the crust of sweat on his back with his left finger, as it had stuck to his dress which had not been washed for want of water, said, "At least in Hastinapura we had a river. But the spot where we are asked to camp is four miles distant from the river. My land is very different from these places. There we have

plenty of water — streams and waterfalls everywhere. What a wretched country this is. Let's get away from here."

"Yes, yes. You are right. Let's all leave together for home, "another said.

Yet another questioned, "Then are you suggesting that Kunti's children belong to the Kaurava lineage?"

The one rubbing off the sweat-crust dexterously, queried, "Who are these children of Kunti? And what is this Kaurava lineage you are talking about?"

The second one, "Don't you even know that, you duffer? We are now fighting against the children of Kunti. Those from Hastinavati are the Kauravas."

A new entrant to the group asked, "Is not this Kunti a son of Kaurava lineage?"

Only one soldier who knew the facts, laughed at the statement. The others who were not so knowledgeable did not understand why he had laughed. The laughing person made fun of his companions, saying, "We are utterly stupid and ignorant fellows. No wonder we are looked down upon as barbarians from the hills. What kind of ~Arya can he be who knows nothing about the Kaurava lineage."

The one rubbing off the sweat, "Anyway we are Aryans from, Aryavarta. We are twenty-five days' journey away from the Aryan region. We have to cross Gandhara to reach it. Our climate is not so warm and sultry. What is our business with this war and this lineage?"

Another elderly person, "Why bother? They said that those who want to go home, can leave. That's good enough for me. Let's all go home together."

The one who had ridiculed the others:." Stupid fellows. Duffers, you don't know who Kauravas are and who Kunti's children are. You do not even know that just because they say we* can go, we can't leave immediately."

Another sweat-covered soldier, "Why not?" As he asked the question, he raised his hand as if to hit. Somewhere at the back, a horse neighed. Then another horse followed suit. It was followed by a chorus of some twenty or thirty horses. Another soldier said, "The horses have a nice time . There are both male and female horses!"Then he laughed at his own joke.

Someone else said, "That is why we say that these folk from Aryavarta do not know the secrets of horses. As our people know..."Interrupting him the one who had raised the hand asked

"Why not? Tell me?"

The knowledgeable one, "Let's see now. Let those who are not stupid offer an answer."

A turbaned fellow, "Is it any Vedic secret? I shall explain. Listen to me. My king's wife is from the Gandhara royal family. They say that this Kaurava king is a son of Gandhara woman. That means our king will fight on his side. And we have no choice in the matter. We shall have to fight on the side our king wants. You may want to go home, but who will let you go?"

Three soldiers shouted together, "Then why did they announce the message by drum-beating?" But most of them found themselves in agreement with the turbaned soldier. What had appeared simple, easy and light, now became very complicated. Behind them, they heard the stamping of the horses. They turned back. There were horse-men with huge clubs, signalling the animals to keep moving. Those who didn't obey were prodded with clubs or even severely beaten up. The horses came under control, but they did not stop being restive.

The one who had referred to the issue of their knowledge of the secrets of horses, said, "Look here. I have been watching it so far. I see that they also have here horse-men who use the system of signs we use to communicate with the horses. Look at that fellow, riding on that red horse, the one tightening the clasp round the belly of the animal with his knees bulging with calf muscles. He must be one of them. No outsider can make out these signs. He must have learnt it from our people. I can Swear it."

The horseman was able to bring back the animals under control. He indicated to his grooms how to bridle them. By the manner in which the grooms obeyed him and behaved towards him, it was obvious that he was a man of consequence, a commanding officer. He was around fifty, fair complexioned and tall. He wore the tight dress of a horse-rider. His face exuded royal , authority, but there was no crown, not even a small one, on hi§ head. Only a turban.

Sitting on the horse, Yuyutsu surveyed the whole lot of horses in the army of Duryodhana. He examined their faces, the degree of sharpness of their eyes and the dung they had dropped. He enquired about the colour of their urine and the health of every horse. Whenever he found an animal suffering from a minor ailment, he quickly suggested the medicine. Then he proceeded to the chariot formation. Dussasana who crossed him on the way, asked him in the tone of one inspecting things, "Yuyutsu, is everything all right? Did you take a look at the horses harnessed to the chariots?"

Yuyutsu didn't reply. And Dussasana did not make any further

enquiries. As he was in a great hurry he left. The horses had not yet been yoked to the chariots. But they were tethered and grouped separately from the other horses. By the time he reached them, Yuyutsu changed his mind. He felt no enthusiasm to go any further. He was also not sure about where to move next. When he turned his horses to the right, he heard the drummer- announcer on the elephant shouting his message. Of course, he was aware of , the matter, and he had heard the massage twice earlier. Yet he halted, and listened to the same message again." Those who do not want to be with the great king Duryodhana can go over to the enemy's side or those who do not want to fight the war, can return to their places. Time is given to them to make up Mr minds till tomorrow morning." He felt like going to a secluded spot to think over the matter. But where could he go? No matter how far he went, there were swarms of infantry-men. Or horses, chariots, elephants and bullock carts coming from Hastinavati loaded with provisions. Yuyutsu realised that his mind worked best when riding a horse. Yet, now he was feeling helpless, unable to see any light. Was it because he was tired? Or because he had no sleep during the last three nights? Or what? His mind went blank at this point. Wondering whether at fifty one could not think on the back of a horse, he gave up. They were given the option to join the enemy or return home. Already six months had passed since the negotiations over war and peace were first started. However, he had not an iota of doubt about Duryodhana's decision. Of course, he wanted war. But he was not sure whether the Pandavas had the resources to engage in a war. Now he saw that they, too, had seven divisions of the army. They had also a few rulers supporting them with their armies. Yuyutsu himself was from the start against the war. He had made this clear to Duryodhana also. But no one listened to him. Just then the horse he was sitting on began to neigh. It lifted its two front legs and loosened up its muscles. Wondering what had happened to it, he gripped its body with his thighs and legs. Then he began to examine his position more critically. Did he really reject war? Or was it something else? He probed his memory to be certain. He reflected, "No. For me the issue was not war or no war. I was born in this household to a servant-maid through king Dhritarashtra. The servant of his wife, Gandhari. Mother always refers to Dhritarashtra as my father. She behaves with him as if she is his regular wife married to him through the prescribed marriage rite, involving the procedure of jointly taking the seven steps with him. Of course, there was no marriage. Yet she has shown him a wife's loyalty. It was the Ksatriya custom to send with the bride a number of beautiful girls as companions and servants to her — to serve the bride, to please her husband in the bed. My mother used to be the only one among the servant-maids privileged to address Gandhari as 'friend'. The Gandhara kings were not very wealthy, and they could send just ten maids. Even to this day, Gandhari refers to

mother as ‘friend’. It was my mother who walked blind-folded Gandhari around, by holding her hand." After he had tightened the grip of his thighs and legs the horse touched the ground with its front legs." The horse, too, gets no rest. Well, the King who is regarded by me as father addresses me as son, no doubt. But only son, not a prince. That title was exclusively meant for the children of Gandhari who had done the seven-steps rite with him, all the fourteen children who had come out of her womb. All fourteen sons. Also the fifteenth child, his daughter Dussale. But we are mere sons. Just progeny of Dhritarashtra. Not Kauravas. Not princes. The horse, too, has no rest. No matter how tiring and taxing, I prefer to ride the horse I am used to, rather than a strange one. My love for the horse seems to be its undoing.." Just then

Duryodhana came from the opposite direction. As soon as he saw Yuyutsu, he turned his horse towards him, and his body- guards followed suit.

Duryodhana opened the conversation, "Brother Yuyutsu, are the horses healthy and fit? Just a while back, Preceptor Drona was saying that the horses will play a key role in this war. The entire responsibility rests on your shoulders because you are the lord of the horses. It is in critical times like this that the animals are vulnerable to epidemics. New place, new earth, new water, even the fodder has a new look. Is the supply of fodder all right?"

Yuyutsu replied briefly, "Everything is fine." He didn’t feel like talking further. Duryodhana looked at his face. Then riding close to him, he placed a hand on his shoulder, and asked, "What is the matter, younger brother?" There was affection in his voice. Yuyutsu did not reply. Either because he did not want to pressurise his brother to answer or because he was reluctant to talk before other horse-men, Duryodhana did not pursue the theme. He simply said, "It seems kings from the east have arrived. I have to go to welcome them." Then he left. Yuyutsu did not turn his face in his direction. He didn’t turn the horse too in that direction. Now he found things sorting out. It had never been really an issue with him whether he wanted war or not. He was aware that the ultimate decision on this issue was beyond his competence. He was, after all, the son of a servant-maid, just like the other eighty five similarly born. Duryodhana had never really accorded them the status of siblings. He had never addressed them as brothers. They were all called by the jobs they performed — horse-groom, chariot worker, superintendent of elephant-boys. He was so used to it that it had become natural, and he had never felt any odium attached to it. Yuyutsu thought, "Yes, I was born to a servant-maid. Don’t I know that I should not aspire to the status of children born to regularly married wives?" When Drupada’s priest had come as a messenger,

Duryodhana had said for the first time, "Well, they may be five brothers. But we are hundred brothers. Remember I have ninety-nine younger brothers. Not just thirteen. Note it." Later when Krishna of the Yadavas came to negotiate peace, he had said the same thing. I recall that satisfaction glowed on father's face when he heard this. Did father think that his eldest son had at last recognised them as brothers by showing them fraternal love? But I felt a turmoil with in me. After the peace parleys broke down and war became certain, what a remarkable change was there in Duryodhana's behaviour! Gone was the language of a master. It was replaced by the new language of a brother addressing a brother. He began to drip brotherly love and solicitude. He who had never bothered to know where our thatched hutments lay, came personally to visit our leaders with his servant. How worried he was about the welfare of our wives and children! What joy this produced in the Süta wives, what feeling of fulfilment! Even for my own wife and children! Also in their husbands! The great Maharaja himself had come in person! My wife Bhadra asked me, 'When the Maharaja himself has arrived in person here, why is your face so sullen?'

"Even if I were to explain to her in detail, how could she fathom the bitterness and sense of rejection that burned within me!"The horse raised its front legs. He understood that, if it exerted too much, it would become defiant. He immediately got off, and handed over the bridle to a servant, sending it away with him. A servant asked him if he wanted another horse. Yuyutsu wondered why he should have another horse and he didn't have any idea where he wanted to go.

"Why is it that only I developed this attitude of opposition, while others did not?" He asked himself, but no sooner did he ask it than the answer flashed in his mind immediately. But he could not articulate that answer to himself. All of a sudden, he remembered his uncle Vidura. In a way, it was he who had brought him up from childhood. How could a blind father fondle and play with his large progeny, fifteen born to a married wife and eighty-six born to servant maids? Moreover, how could the children dropping from the wombs of servant-maids be so fondled and played with, like children born to a married wife? He was told that his uncle Vidura took a liking to him even when he was a one-year old baby. His mother used to tell him often that his uncle found him to be an unusually alert and intelligent child. He thought, "If my uncle had not taken interest in me and brought me up, I, too, would have been like the other Süta Children. I would not have even known what it meant to oppose and reject. It is not just in Hastinavati. Every palace everywhere was surrounded by the community of progeny born to servant-maids. Uncle told me this so often. He also used to tell me that, without the devotion and loyalty of this Süta progeny, no kingdom would

survive..."Yuyutsu now understood the implication of his uncle's words. And that intensified his opposition and rejection. What sort of life , was it? The woman was there to provide sexual enjoyment for the king, just as the regular queens also did. Children tumbling out of her womb, these creatures were denied even the opportunity of a Vaisya to cultivate his own land and enjoy a life of independence. And they were denied the status of a prince. If the child was a female, it became a servant-maid to a princess, or a companion. She had to go with that princess when she married, and allow her husband to enjoy her body and produce children to perpetuate the Süta community. His thinking was interrupted by the servant who brought another horse for him. He seemed to be a smart fellow, as he had brought just the animal he wanted, one of the few Yuyutsu loved. He climbed its back, but didn't know where to go. He didn't feel like supervising the other horses. All of a sudden, he felt an urge to look up uncle Vidura. At the same time, one interesting feature of the present war struck him. Everybody had come to war including old grand-father with jutting bones and the Great Preceptor with his firm jaws. And, of course, all the others. He asked himself: But why has not uncle Vidura come? No doubt, he is not a particularly good warrior. But then are all these old men who have come, good war material? They have come mostly to enthuse and encourage others, the younger men. And urge them, 'You stupid fellows. Don't turn your back out of fear. Do you know ' how bravely we used to fight in the good old days?' Also to help in the formulation of strategies and tactics. But why didn't uncle come? Like Bhishma and Dronacharya, he had initially opposed the war. But they have changed their position and have come to lead the men in this war. But uncle didn't budge an inch from his position of opposition to the war, and decided to stay behind in the town. His respect for his uncle suddenly became enhanced. He was curious to find out who was behind the idea of giving the options of joining the enemy or returning home, and why. Then he drove towards the tent of the chief commander, revered Bhishma.

From the supervisor of the tent he found that the warrior was not available in the camp. He was believed to have gone to the forest where the sage Krishna Dvaipayana lived, to consult him oh some grave matter. The tent supervisor, Somaratha, too, was a Süta like Yuyutsu. But he was not a son of Dhritarashtra. He was born to a servant-maid in Hastinavati, who had relations with Pandu before his marriage. Naturally, he had a soft corner in his heart for the Pahdavas. He also liked Yuyutsu. Fourteen years ago, Yuyutsu had raised boldly the question of Dharma in the full court, when Duryodhana had defeated Dharmaraja in a game of dice and driven him into the forests. From that day onwards, Somaratha had shown a special regard for Yuyutsu. Especially because it required incredible

courage on the part of a Süta to speak out in an open court graced by the presence of such elderly men of wisdom as Bhishma and Drona, and royal personages like his own father Dhritarashtra and Maharaja Duryodhana. From what Somaratha had said, Yuyutsu guessed the background to the drummer's message of offering options.

Yuyutsu, "What do you think of this drummer-message?"

Somaratha, "What do you mean?"

Yuyutsu, "Your father is King Pandu. Now aren't you free to join your brother's camp?"

Somaratha felt confused, and stunned. He asked, "What is it that you are suggesting?"

Yuyutsu, "Brotherly love and obligation."

Somaratha, "Look, don't joke. They do not even have a nodding acquaintance with me. They have never regarded me and called me their Mother."

Yuyutsu, "May be they are scared that if they called you a brother, they may feel bound to crown you as king instead of Dharmaraja!"

Somaratha, "How can the son of servant-maid claim the kingdom? Yuyutsu, you appear to be in a very jocular mood today. Why?"

Yuyutsu didn't say a word more. He asked himself why he asked such questions. He didn't have an answer. He got on the horse and rode away. He did not know where he was going. He felt that he and his horse were needlessly tiring out. But he did not know what else he could do. He thought that perhaps the best thing was to go to his tent and go to sleep. So he moved to wards his tent. But when he reached it, he felt an urge to get back to Hastinavati to look up his uncle. But it was not a short distance. Even when one rode fast, it would be a journey of around eight hours. Then he just got off his horse, entered his tent and slept. Very soon he was in a deep sleep.

But after a short while, he felt as if some darkness within had engulfed him, and he woke up. He sat up abruptly. Now the desire to see his uncle became irresistible. He washed the sweat formed during sleep on his face, and rode a way on his horse. He didn't tell his servant about his destination. After passing the site where soldiers, elephants, horses and vehicles gathered, he avoided the straight road. He was aware that all through the route he would cross carts carrying provisions and elephants bearing war material. He turned to the right and rode fast. After passing the camp and its vicinity he entered a terrain free from dust, a clear blue sky above a green environment. It exhilarated him. It also cleared his mind. He thought, "Anyhow they have announced openly the options." He

wanted to seize the opportunity to leave Duryodhana's side, and join the Pandavas. He felt that, before doing so, he must consult his uncle. He was now clear in his mind that he was on his way to his uncle Vidura. He had absolutely no doubt that the Pandavas would embrace him and welcome him most warmly. After crossing a village and after he became sure of the right route, he began to think, "Why should there be more love for children born to a properly married wife? Instead of the wife who had blind-folded herself, wasn't it my mother who attended to all the needs of his father? Not bad, this horse looks good. It runs fast, and does not go jolting. It goes with such ease and grace as if it is floating in the air. I have at the tip of my tongue the names of the fourteen sons born to his properly wedded wife.,In order of seniority — Duryodhana, Dussasana, Dussaha, Dussala, Durdharsha, Dushpradharshana, Durmarshana, Durmukha, Dushkarna, Durmada, Durviga, Durvirochana, Dushparajaya, Duradhara, and the last, a daughter, Dussale. Of course, I can understand the love for a daughter. Should not the father who has produced children out of the servant-maids have enough love for these children to remember their names at least? He knows only a few — Jalasandha, Sama, Saha, Vinda, Anuvinda, and of course, myself. That is because these are the children of Gandhari's favourite servant-maid and companion. As for the others, they are as good as non-existent. And, naturally, these children had no right to visit their father whenever they wished. Of course, they also do not seem to have such a wish." This appeared strange to him. His sense of rejection of things, the whole arrangement, became revived. He thought, "How gladly Duryodhana said, 'my brother Yuyutsu; my dear younger brother.' Words of affection! And father even today condescends to embrace only me, when I go to him, but he doesn't go beyond that, to accept me as a legitimate son by sniffing my head, as dictated by our hoary custom ..."It shocked him at this point to realise that he, too, a son of a servant-maid, remembered better the names of children other than those born to the servant-maids!

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Chapter 45

BY the time he reached Hastinavati it was the time when the whole town went to sleep and Yuyutsu liked it. He didn't want to go to his own home. On the way itself he had made up his mind to go straight to his uncle's place. He did not enter through the main gate, but turned right to reach the bank of the river. It was quite dark. On the steps leading from hi s uncle's house to the river-bank, he perceived two figures sitting. He guessed that they must be Kunti and uncle. Kunti, he knew, sat mostly on the steps or watched the river from the front-yard platform. His uncle, too, slept late, and was also fond of sitting near the river. Sitting close to each other, they were mostly silent. Uncle, of course, was by nature a man of few words. Kunti, too, was becoming increasingly silent. His aunt Parasavi wasa sick person. Yuyutsu thought, "She must be in bed. It is the time when the children, daughters-in-law and grand-children are asleep." He halted and tethered the horse. Then he began to climb the steps, when his uncle recognised him. He got down the steps to meet him, and called out 'Yuyutsu'. Yuyutsu climbed up quickly and bowed, first to uncle and then to Kunti. Vidura asked, "Are you coming straight from the war camp?" Uncle usually knew every detail about the happenings-

Members of the Süta community and castes lower down in scale, had great love and respect for him. Thus news reached him from countless directions and through countless sources. After he washed his feet and face in the river, Vidura took him home. In the[7] kitchen, Kunti served Yuyutsu the meal. He had seen her often, and had talked with her whenever he had visited uncle's house. He had never before observed how large her hands were. He realised now that they were so large that even in this old age they could easily wield a club. They were so large that just two helpings of rice from them would fill his belly. She didn't ask anything about the war. Uncle himself went out to give the horse fodder and water. Then he returned to sit by his side. He asked him in low tone, "Why did you all on a sudden decide to come this way?"

Yuyutsu first explained the episode of the drummer-message, and then continued, "My mind was in commotion. I just rode a way to see you, talk to you, regain my mental equanimity. While on my way

here, I made up my mind to go over to the Pandavas."

Vidura did not immediately respond. And Yuyutsu knew well that his uncle always deliberated before giving any answer. Yuyutsu looked at Kunti's face. She asked him, "Are you the only one to join the Pandavas?"

He answered, "No, I do not know. I didn't discuss this with any others. I also felt that even if I discuss it they wouldn't be in a position to see the finer points of duty and honour." Then he lowered his neck to consume seven or eight balls of rice mixed with milk. After that he said, "Uncle, you, grand-father and the Preceptor, were unanimous that it was wrong to go to war, and allow it to take place. But now they have gone to fight a war which they had earlier characterised as Adharma, a violation of Dharma. Not only that, they have accepted the responsibility to be commander and chief commander. Only you have remained at home, unable to compromise with your conscience. I wanted to test my decision by discussing it with you, benefiting from your wisdom. That is why I am here."

Vidura didn't reply. He sat silent, he wore a simple but clean dress. His hair and beard were, as always, unkempt. Yuyutsu pressed further, "Are you not subjected here to pin-pricks because you refused to go to the war?"

It was Kunti who answered. She said, "How can they refrain from heaping harassment on him for this refusal to fight on their side? They could have forgiven him if he had just said that he was too old to go to war. But your uncle took a strong moral stand and said, 'What you do in unjust. It is a violation of Dharma. I shall not participate in your war. I shall prohibit my children and grand-children to participate as well.' Do you think such words will not invite reprisal? It is true that Duryodhana went off to the war, just shrugging, 'It is of no consequence if this old son of a servant doesn't join us.' But the blind father rooted here heaps abuses in plenty on Vidura, even in his dreams. He has even stooped so low as to send some of his men to steal his milching cows. He has got his stock of fodder behind the house destroyed through fire. Luckily, the stock of grain could not be destroyed because it was stored inside the house."

Yuyutsu, "Why did he resort to such stealthy methods? He could have exercised his authority as a king and punished him."

Kunti, "Well, from the beginning the blind man has been fond of Vidura. Moreover he is afraid that the people who have regard for Vidura may resent such action. That may be the reason why he didn't order punishment."

Now Vidura at last opened his mouth, "There is nothing surprising

in Dhritarashtra behaving in this manner. But what pains me is that the people of Hastinavati have now started to look down upon me with contempt, as if I am a traitor. When the king goes to war, should not the whole kingdom go to war, all the subjects? The old, the bodily disabled, women and children alone have the privilege to stay behind, in the eyes of the people. Everybody else, they believe, must follow the king and his cause."

Kunti served two more helpings. When she thrust her hand into the vessel to serve a third helping, Yuyutsu said, "No ". The pungent smell of milk, curd and butter in the kitchen hit his nostrils, for the first time. Vidura asked, "When war is on, the fever of devotion to the king rises naturally. Why shouldn't a person who does not want war be allowed to keep away from it?"

Yuyutsu, "Why don't you shift to Upaplavya city with Kunti, where the Pandavas and their supporters live?"

Vidura, "Why should I go? I was born in this town. I grew up right here. My children and grand-children sow seeds, cultivate the lands and collect harvest around this town. My cows and cattle have grown here, grazing the grass on the river bank and drinking the water in the river. Why should I give up all this and run away like a foreigner? After all, what is my crime? I didn't say, give Hastinavati to the Pandavas. I said, return to them what is their share. Let's keep only what is ours. The rulers and leaders don't relish such words. The injustice to the Pandavas is no matter of concern for them. They are worried that, if they part with territory, it would clip the wings of a kingdom which had been earlier much larger, and blunt their horns of arrogance. That is their mulishness."

Yuyutsu finished his meal, drank water from a copper vessel, and washed his hands and mouth. Kunti took away his plate. All the three sat in the kitchen itself. Vidura said, "So you felt like joining the Pandavas? Certainly, if that is what you wish, you must do so. Fight with real commitment. But you can be sure that here they will harass your wife and children. What do you intend to do about it?"

Yuyutsu had not seen this side of the matter. True, the army chief, Bhishma, had given them the option to return home or go over to the Pandavas. That was the message drummed and shouted. Now, he saw that the matter was not that simple or easy. Perhaps that option was meant only for other rulers, not for the subjects of this kingdom, for those who had lived on the food grown on this soil, its air and water. But was that implied in the message? Should he return and ask for clarification? Suppose he was told that the warriors of this kingdom had no such option. As such thoughts floated in his mind, he felt very sleepy. He had no sleep for the previous three nights. Then there was the strain of the long journey through rough roads. Then his stomach

was heavy with the generous meal served by Kunti. Vidura said, "Don't go stealthily. Go like a man after openly proclaiming that you find Duryodhana's cause unjust, and -that you are joining the side you have judged to be the more just. Confront, and never be a coward."

Yuyutsu nodded full agreement. Kunti who had been watching his sleepiness, suggested that he should go in and sleep.

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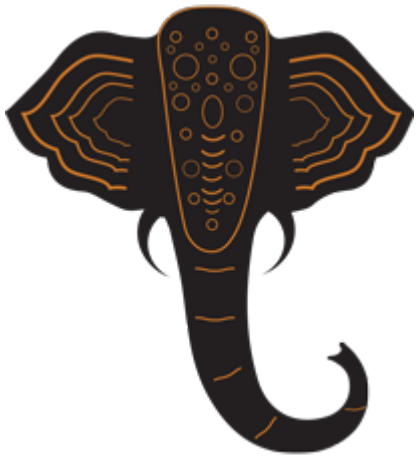
PART ELEVEN



Chapter

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THE champing and chafing of the horses tethered pervaded the air. The rows of elephants stood at some distance. The servants were collecting horse-dung but, not knowing where to dispose it of, they simply heaped it into little hillocks here and there. The foul smell had already started to spread at the rim of the camp. In the awning specially set up for Dronacharya, the aroma of the fire ritual performed in the previous night, still lingered, countering the foul smell from outside. Having finished his morning bath, he was sitting near the fire, and had yet to start the rite. To the right, rested the bundles of twigs, and leaf-cups containing ghee. Some ritual formula was struggling hard to come out of his memory and consciousness, but he was unable to identify it. He also felt angry that this should worry him at this time. In fact, that was not a formula relevant to the occasion. Then he began to fan the fire in the small earthen pot, while feeding it at the same time with twigs. He recalled that for the last eighty years he had continuously protected and worshipped this fire ever since he was initiated into Brahmin-hood. He had never before had any occasion to kindle the fire with flints afresh and feed it with twigs. This was because wherever he shifted, he had carried the original fire of the hearth continuously kept alive. Then he heard the stamping of the tethered horses. Drona thought that, if these animals which daily exerted and lightened their bodies by running with a rider on their back, were thus tethered, what else could they do but stamp restlessly? This reminded him that he had missed the ride that morning. At that thought, he felt his body ache. He remembered Bhishma making fun of him now and then, by saying, "Great Preceptor, when you ride, you exercise your body but never that of the horse!"He was not very muscular, and the bone-frame showed up somewhat prominently. He had a lean body. As he was saying to himself that body was the source of all power and energy, he looked unintentionally at his dried up body. There weren't many wrinkles. He thought that only fat persons tended to acquire wrinkles and folds. He saw the flames burst through the cloud of smoke. Then he suddenly remembered the words of the ritual formula, that was bothering him: "He (Fire) is hidden in the water as a sign, he is hidden in the trees of the forest as forest-fire, he resides

in the static objects like wood. He lives in living organisms as the fire of hunger." He was upset that he could forget such an excellent mantra. With the passage of time, only formula words used in daily rituals remained in his memory. The rest of the Vedas had been expelled from his consciousness. He reflected, "Can Bhishma be right? Have I become a Ksatriya in all but name, having forgotten all the sacred lore, studying the Vedas during the youth but gradually transforming myself into an expert archer, unfit to be a Brahmin instructing the sacred lore?" Outside, the horses neighed." It is my horse neighing. I can make it out even amidst the neighing of a thousand horses. Even if amidst a thousand persons I call it, it will recognise my voice and obey me." He remembered that his horse cocked its ears and listened carefully before discriminating his voice. The rite began. The routine formulaic words came out of his mouth as fluently and as fast as the arrows did out of his skilled archer's hand! As the aroma of the ghee filled his nose, again and again the words of the Vedic formula captured the manifold reality of fire. That was the only formula that stuck in his memory. He poured all the ghee into the fire. As the flames rose chest-high, he felt as if he was seeing the fire in all its splendour. Praying to Agni to lead him on the right road he went round it three times, as prescribed by the rite. Then he came out of his tent and saw that it was his horse. He guessed that it must have neighed when it heard the ritual chanting. As he went near it and fondled its neck affectionately, it responded by sniffing him with equal affection. From its mouth dripped soaked, powdered rice all round. He could smell it. His horse was surrounded by a sea of horses. The air was filled with the sound of their neighing, the noise made by their toes grating against the ground, and the noise of the carpenters repairing the chariots. Inside the tent, there was the exhilarating aroma of the ghee consumed by fire. One would have to close one's eyes and breathe slowly and deeply to enjoy fully the aroma inside. Outside, the stench, so difficult to stand even for a day. He thought that if he stood there longer, the stench might overpower him. It was difficult to hold his breath in the nostrils longer than a minute or two. Therefore, he decided to breathe more freely and brave the stench. The servant came from behind and spoke respectfully in a low voice, 'Preceptor." Drona turned back and heard him say "The food is getting cold. You were late in bathing and performing the morning rite."

Drona, "What if the food gets cold?" Without knowing it, he had injected some anger into the answer. The servant was familiar with his master's vagaries in behaviour, and wasn't surprised. He just stood there in silence. Then he said, "You go. I'll follow." Then he asked the servant who was entering the tent, "Is my son, Aswatthama, ready to eat?"

The servant, "He went out on his horse in the morning. He has not

returned yet. He hasn't bathed even."

Drona, "You ass, don't you know that I never eat without him?" There was anger in his voice.

He stood still for a while, his head bent. Then he spoke, "The food is getting cold. If the milk is boiled again, it may curdle. It is yesterday night's milk. The supply people have said that no fresh milk is available before evening."

Drona, "Where has he gone?" His hand was fondling his red horse's neck. The sun was sharp. Very soon, the sun would climb high over the head.

He answered, "A charioteer came and informed him that the war-chariots under his command had scattered. It was before sunrise. Even before washing his mouth, and without washing his horse, he rode away after them. It is certain he won't be back till he gets his chariots in proper order."

Drona merely grunted, "Uh ". The servant went inside. He got angry with his son. The horse stretched its neck further forward. He untethered it and used the rope to scrub it. He thought it would have been nice if it was washed. But he realised soon that there would be no water. On reflection he thought that his son was right in getting the chariots, horses and soldiers under his command into a properly organised formation, so that they were ready any time to plunge into war. But he continued to be angry because his son had gone off on a horse without washing his face and performing the rite required for a Brahmin. He now felt convinced that his son would never be a proper Brahmin. The servant re-appeared at the door. Drona remembered his statement that the milk would curdle if boiled again and that there was no supply of milk till evening. As he visualised the army, chariots, horses, elephants and other personnel, he lost hope of getting milk even by the evening. A voice somewhere within warned Drona that this might be the last occasion on which he would enjoy the luxury of eating a meal with milk. After scrubbing the animal's neck rapidly some eight times, he tethered the horse. Then reaching the door, he announced, "Bring a little water. I shall wash my hand and then sit to eat the meal."

He always enjoyed rice cooked in milk. But now he could see that rice cooked in water and then mixed later with milk didn't taste anywhere near the milk-cooked rice. It was yesterday evening's milk. He reconciled himself to the meal as soon as he realised that the milk would have curdled if not used in this way. His jaws and molar teeth were still good enough for chewing the rice. But the canines were missing—since when? he asked himself. Ten years, no nine years. As he poured rice into the plate and started to eat, he remembered his

son. The anger returned. It was very rarely that he ate without his son's company. And the fellow knew that his father didn't like eating without him. Today, he thought what mattered was the convenience of the Ksatriyas. The Brahmins had virtually forgotten the practice of performing personally their rites. They had now begun to call the priests to perform them. He said to himself, "Perhaps they have even abandoned their habit of bathing. It is so late and Aswatthama has not yet offered the rite to fire. What sort of a son have I spawned! I should have taken my meal in the room where the rite was performed. In this room, the foul smell of horse-dung assails my nose. Or is it also human excretion? And these fighting men do not have the sense of cleanliness to go far to defecate. But when the army is everywhere, how far can they go? I cannot be sure that he will return home for eating. Most likely, he has finished it at Duryodhana's tent or Karna's or Dussasana's. Anyway, in some other place! I know he isn't the type to keep away from his food this long..."The thought calmed Drona's agitated mind. But soon the anger against him for eating at all sorts of places, without offering the ritual worship to fire, returned. It made him sad to realise that the practice of safeguarding the ritual fire from the time one had the sacred thread to the day of one's death might die out. He couldn't go on with his meal. It couldn't be relished. But he was against wasting rice. He believed in the ancient adage that to reject the food was to insult it. But Aswatthama followed a different rule. He often asked to be served a lot, and at the time of the third helping, he miscalculated his need. Rice was wasted, unused in the plate, to be thrown away as offal. Drona cursed his son for wasting rice like that in spite of his continued admonition and abuse. He asked himself, "What can one say about such a fellow? Mentally retarded, stuck at the bovine level of intelligence? Or let me see, yes. Or could it be that he has acquired the Ksatriyas habit of wasting food as a matter of prestige? Is he reluctant to explain things to me because he is afraid of me, and therefore prefers to be merely abused by me?" Drona wanted to test his suspicion that his son was following a Ksatriyas practice. His right hand automatically went into action. He poured the rice into the plate, emptying the vessel. Then he finished it and went out to wash his hands. Amidst the noise of men, horses, elephants and chariots, he heard very distinctly the sound of a drum. His curiosity was instantly roused. He said to himself, "Did the drum betoken the starting of the war? That means Bhishma has decided the timing of the war without consulting me." The very idea made him feel insulted. He listened to the message very carefully. But there appeared to be no message, merely the sound of the drum. The sound of the drum was mixed up with other noises. Drona asked the servant who was washing his plate, "Havya, they are announcing something outside. Did you hear the drum beating? Hurry and find out what it's all about."

Adjusting his lower garment, Havya rushed out to do the job. Drona ruminated, "The old fellow calls me the preceptor in name. But whenever a crucial decision is taken, he keeps me out. That goes for Dhritarashtra, too. Even Duryodhana who calls himself my disciple is no better." Then he squatted before the ritual hearth. Thanks to its aroma, the stench of horse-dung was effectively kept out. While he was taking a deep breath, he yawned. From as long as he could remember, he was used to an after-meal nap. He unrolled the mat lying near by, and stretched himself. The sound of the drum had ceased. Or had it? He had a vague feeling that something was being announced. He thought that Aswatthama's statement that his ears were weakening, was perhaps true. He yawned once again. Then he closed his eyes. Outside the horse neighed. His body was paining, perhaps because life in the camp was sedentary. He was poised for sleep.

Just then, Havya returned. Coming closer, he reported, "They are making an announcement. They are saying that those five who were born through Niyoga do not belong to the Kuru lineage at all. The Pandavas are mounting an invasion on us. Those who believe that it is Dharma to defend the purity of the Kuru lineage should stay with us. Those who believe that justice is with the Pandavas, are free to join their camp. Those who do not want to get involved in the dispute, can go back home. The announcer speaks from the back of an elephant, after beating the drum."

Drona realised that this announcement was in accordance with a decision taken with his participation. This meant that no decision had been taken, keeping him out. His discontentment became considerably reduced as a consequence. Saying to himself, "All right ", he turned to one side and slept. Even though the snoring through gaps between teeth did not distrub his sleep, he tossed on the bed three times before going into deep sleep, with his face upwards.

When he got up and flexed his body, he found Havya standing at the kitchen door. Drona thought that he was waiting to say something. He ordered Havya, "What is it?" Havya moved two steps closer, showing fear and devotion on his face and said "They have given the option that those who do not want to get involved, can return home. I have been thinking of returning home, and I wanted your permission."

Drona did not grasp immediately the meaning of his words. He asked him to explain, which he did.

Drona, "You, chicken-hearted fellow. The options were announced for the soldiers. Not for the likes of you."

Havya, "But when a war is on,do only soldiers lose their lives? The

enemies rush on our tents, too. They set fire to the camp. I am not a soldier, true, but if I shout that I am a mere servant, not a soldier, who would hear me in that excitement and confusion? Even if they did hear me, who will have the patience to discriminate and spare me?"

Drona, "But that won't happen in this war. The two sides have agreed to abide by the rule that only those actively engaged in combat can be attacked by arrows or other weapons. Therefore, have courage and confidence." But deep down in himself, he had grave doubts about the agreement being respected.

Havya also echoed the same doubt, "Great Preceptor, do you believe really that when tempers rise, people will have time for rules? Please don't get angry that I have the cheek to talk about war in your presence."

When Drona arrived first in Hastinavati as an instructor in archery to the princes, Havya's father was appointed as a servant in his household. His name was Nala. Drona's wife was alive then but she was an in valid. Nala used to cook the food. Havya was then an eight year old boy. The boy was in charge of grazing the horses. After Nala's death, Drona got Havya relieved from the work of horse grazing, and switched him over to the kitchen to work as a cook. Havya could take some liberty because of this association.

Yet Drona did get angry. But he also felt that Havya's words were true. He just sat in a lotus posture and speculated on the consequence of the drummed announcement regarding the options. He wondered how many would defect to the enemy and how many would just go home. Of course, there was no question of Hastinavati's soldiers doing either. They owed Duryodhana the debt due to a giver of food. Drona then began to guess which rulers would stay and which would leave. But he saw Havya still standing there. He realised that he had not answered Havya's question.

Drona, "Havya, you have eaten for so many days the food of King Duryodhana. It would be a violation of Dharma on your part if you now desert him at this critical juncture."

Havya was silent. Drona thought that his words had the effect of shutting his mouth. He yawned loudly once, and ordered, "Fetch me some water." He went out with the cup filled with water, brought by Havya, and washed his mouth. Returning, he sat on the mat and drank the remaining water. Havya put the cup back in the kitchen, but he returned to stand near his master. Drona turned back to see him, and felt that his mouth had not been shut by his words.

He asked Havya, "What is it?" Havya answered with utmost humility, "I have served you and eaten your food. I am still eating it.

Not that of Maharaja Duryodhana. Moreover, how can the Goddess of Dharma approve when you say that the Pandavas do not belong to the Kuru lineage? I recall that a son-in-law of my uncle was serving in the palace at Khandavaprastha. After the Pandavas lost their kingdom, he came to Hastinavati. I am repeating what he said to me. Nobody can equal the eldest of the Pandava brothers, Dharmaraja, in the matter of performing the rituals and rites. But let that be. I am not competent to discuss the subtleties of Dharma. After all, I am a Vaisya. A person living by sowing, cultivating and harvesting the land. I have grown up in your service. Why should I needlessly entangle myself in this war?"

He turned his neck and saw Havya's face. With anguish, Havya added, "To tell the truth, I had no idea of what a war would be. Now I am haunted by the memory of my wife and children. What will be their fate, if I die?"

Drona stared at him intently. Havya stood there for a while,his eyes cast down. Then he disappeared into the kitchen. But Drona's equanimity had been ruffled. Everyone of the words spoken by Havya came back, hovering in his memory. Drona was happy with Havya's view that the Goddess of Dharma would not approve of the position that the Pandavas did not belong to the Kuru lineage. Drona would not have objected if Duryodhana had simply refused the Pandavas their kingdom on the ground that they were rival kings. He could not stomach the argument that because they were born through Niyoga they were not legitimate members of the lineage, for he had understood Niyoga to be an accepted Aryan practice, perfectly legitimate. At the same time, he was in no position to oppose him openly. He drew a deep breath as he said to himself that Niyoga was a custom continued from time * immemorial. As he breathed, he inhaled the pleasing aroma of the ritual hearth. Into his consciousness floated memories of the past. He came to learn a new fact. Whenever he inhaled an aroma by drawing a deep breath, his memory was kindled. He asked himself, "What is the connection between smelling and remembering?" The nose once again began to inhale the aroma of the ritual fire. Drona thought, "This smell of the ritual fire is the smell of my origin, my roots, my ancestry. I abandoned it wholly in favour of archery. I remember what Satyavrata, a friend of my father, Bharadwaja, had said. How fond of me he was! It seems once father was bathing in Gangadwara. Upstream, an apsara was also bathing at that time. Hers was a peculiarly haunting beauty arising out of hybrid breed. She was born of a union between a Deva man and a woman of the Gandharva or Vidyddhara tribe. Her beauty was enhanced many times by her skill and artistry in dancing, singing and love-making. She climbed back to the bank, dried her body in the sun and the wind and wrapped it with a piece of cloth. Perhaps she was so absorbed in her own beauty

that she had not noticed father bathing down-stream. It was but natural that father was sexually excited. When father approached her for her favour, she refused flatly and left. These tribal women! Had it been a prince or a king of the Aryan folk, they would use all their wile and guile to entice them and permanently enslave them. How could that tribal girl have even the elementary courtesy of satisfying the desire of a poor sage with matted hair? Yes, I remember her name now — Ghritachi." Drona drew his breath once again." No matter how much father entreated, she refused him her body and was cruel enough to climb the hills and vanish into her land. What should this man, bursting with aching desire for her flesh do? A Ksatriya king would have obstructed her or threatened her with his arrows and then forcibly enjoyed her. Father who was of a peaceful character could never have done that. He was by nature very gentle and peaceful. I remember very vividly, how he used to advise me times without number that one should not lose one's temper under any circumstance. But his temperament and mine were different, perhaps poles apart. Still in wet clothes, he was watching the apsara disappear beyond the hills, when a potter woman happened to arrive there by chance. She belonged to the family which specialised in assisting during the rituals and rites. What was her name, name of that woman who became my mother? Who can tell me her name? I have no memory of having seen her. When I was five, father took me away from her, saying, 'This is a child created by me. There is none but this boy who can succeed me in preserving and propagating my learning and knowledge. Please, hand him over to me. I shall take him.' Well, he took me a way. My memory of all this is very dim. I don't know her name. I don't remember the shape and size of her face. I remember Satyavrata telling me one day, 'Your face is like your mother's, not like your father's. When father entreated her, 'Oh! woman!, I am suffering from an acute craving for sex. I feel I am in hell. You are alone. I have no desire to capture you with my brute force. I beg you to take pity on me and give me your body.' Taking pity on him, she consented to sleep with him. Then she conceived me, bore me, delivered me, and brought me up till I was five. When he came to take me away from her, advancing the claim of the seed to its fruit, she surrendered me, even as she wept. I don't remember having seen her. I don't know her name. The name of the seed is important; the soil's does not matter. Yet I can speculate on her face. She had my face. I used to look like this even in youth. It is essentially a bony face." Drona suddenly remembered something. He remembered that Bhishma's mother also hailed from the same mountain region. That was why Bhishma's seven elder brothers became members of the Gandharva tribe. That was because her tribe considered the child to belong to the mother, the soil, rather than to the seed. Drona thought, "Suppose that woman from the Deva land had granted father the favour, suppose I

was born to that Ghritachi, I am sure she would not have surrendered me to father. Then what would I be? And where would I have been?" The very idea stunned the old preceptor. He had had a troubled childhood, poverty, then the attainment of the preceptor status, obligation of eating other people's rice, and so on. That was the life he had gone through, in short. But there, with the Devas, it would have been a different world. He thought, "1 would have had perhaps a number of brothers and sisters. A father or several fathers, but all definitely identifiable." Then Drona's mind lost its way, merging into the undecipherable darkness. His inner darkness merging with the outer darkness. He sat still like a piece of sculpture. Then unintentionally he turned to the right. Havya had gone inside. Drona thought, "May be he is eating his meal." But the mind had become a stream that had lost its way into a desert and dried up there.

After a while, he heard the sound of hooves outside. He knew that it was Ashwatthama by the whirl-wind speed of the horse's arrival, its abrupt halt and the rude noise made by the rider's disengagement, inside the preceptor's mind, utter darkness, as he heard the sudden banging of a door. It was obvious that the designers of the tent had not anticipated the size of its occupants-would be. And the doors were too small for Ashwatthama's bulk. Of course, Drona realised, this was not a tent designed for anyone in particular. It was just a standard type earmarked for persons of a particular status — rulers and commanders. Anybody could have easily inferred from Ashwatthama's face that he had not performed the morning ablutions and rites. It was difficult to guess the original colour of the rider's outfit that clung so tightly to his body. His white beard and hair on the head, had turned greyish brown with dust. The thick thread, wound tightly round his big belly, was soaked in sweat.

"Where did you go off without eating your meal?"

"My chariots, horses and soldiers, had scattered helter-skelter. I located them and organised them into an orderly formation."

"Your meal?"

"I have finished. At Maharaja Duryodhana's tent." Then sitting close to his father, exuding the smell of his sweat, he continued, "It seems that, all of a sudden, Bhishma hurried off to see Krishna Dvaipayana. The Maharaja tried to persuade him that it was not the right time to leave the camp, especially for a chief commander. But the old warrior left, saying that he wanted a subtle point of Dharma clarified by the great sage. He will be returning tomorrow evening, and the war begins on the day after tomorrow at dawn. That is what Bhishma had decided."

Drona's curiosity was kindled. What was this new problem of interpreting the Dharma? He was curious to know. By that time the stench of his son's sweat had spread everywhere in the room. It smothered the sweet aroma of the sandal burnt in the ritual fire. Drona who was taking a deep breath felt choked. He also suspected that the stench of the horse-dung was drifting into the tent. But then he began to chide himself for thinking that he couldn't distinguish the smell of the sweat from the stench of the horse-dung. He asked his son, "Where did you take your bath?"

"I haven't taken my bath. How can one carry out such routine when a war is on?"

"That means you couldn't perform the fire rite?

The son didn't answer. As if feeling the heat, he gave a sigh like a horse. But this was actually the beginning of the cold season. Summer had been over, rains and floods had come and gone, the trees had begun to take on a fresh green look, and the nights were cold enough to require a blanket. And the days were salubrious.

Drona said angrily, more angrily than the words communicated, "Are you a Brahmin or an untouchable?" Drona became aware of this, and immediately expunged the item from his mind, which now came to be occupied by some other matter. And that was his curiosity regarding the subtle point of Dharma which was supposed to be agitating the mind of Bhishma. Drona asked himself, "What is it? The question whether the Pandavas born through Niyoga belong legitimately to the Kuru lineage?" Of course, he was aware of the fact that Bhishma was seriously concerned with this problem. And Bhishma's views on it were also pretty clear. He did not need to take the trouble of going to Krishna Dvaipayana on that issue. Drona thought, "How humiliating it is for me that he, the chief commander, should choose to go away at this time of war, to the forest to discuss some point of Dharma. How did this happen? Usually, he would call for me whenever a question of Dharma arose, and discuss it with me.

But was it a discussion? It was mostly a monologue on the part of Bhishma. He had spent ten to fifteen years on the study of the Vedas in a hermitage across the Ganga on the other bank. And he had never given up his interest in the discussion of Dharma. His grasp of the details relating to the Vedas, science of government and ancient ideals, was great. In running after the science of warfare, I abandoned the pursuit of Vedic learning and teaching long ago. And after hearing those humiliating words from king Drupada, I ' cut myself off totally from the Vedic studies. Yet whenever a question of Dharma arose, Bhishma invariably sent for me. Why did he now go to Krishna Dvaipayana? He didn't inform me of this visit. He could have taken me along with him. Only this morning he had joked with

me, ‘Your nature is not that of a Brahmin. Why don’t you change yourself into a Ksatriya?’ I thought he had said this in pure fun. Or did he really mean it and therefore kept me out of a discussion of Dharma? Because I am not a functioning Brahmin?" Then he shifted his position twice for no reason. His normal sitting posture was a half-lotus posture. One foot placed on the thigh of the other leg and the other foot touched the ground. While he was adjusting his sitting posture, he saw Ashwatthama rise and go out. He heard him shout in the kitchen to Havya, "Havya, serve me my meal. Hurry up." Drona thought, "He said that he had eaten at Maharaja Duryodhana’s tent, and now he is so anxious to have another go at it." He was aware of his son’s gluttony. Always worried about eating, but never about bathing, studying and performing the rites. Immediately it occurred to him, "When even I myself am not interested in Vedic lore and performance of rites, how can I expect my son to do so?" The thought made him angry. He fidgeted with his legs and tried to change his posture once again. He reflected, "Father was a great expert in Vedic studies and in archery. He taught me both with equal interest. He had advised me, ‘Child, try to master both and practise both. But never try to master one at the cost of the other.’ He repeated this frequently. Though he was an expert in both these domains, he embraced poverty, ungrudgingly. He refused the invitation of the mightiest rulers to adorn their courts. He never went to others, and those in need had to come to his hermitage. They had to abide by the discipline of the hermitage. He lived like this till his death. I think he was right. A learned man is a subject of no particular kingdom, and servant to no king. His kingdom is his humble hermitage in the midst of a forest. That is the model of the learned man father cherished and put into practice. I didn’t understand his words at that time, and for many years later. I suppose that is my misfortune." Drona’s anger came down, and he had recovered his mental peace by this time. The breeze blowing from outside was cool to the skin, but unbearable to the nose. This prompted him to move closer to the ritual hearth, whose aroma mitigated the stench from outside. After taking a long breath, he felt happy. Then he went back to the past, "After father’s death, why did I go to Agnivesha for my education? The teacher had an array of skills. Such as dipping the cloth-bound tip of an arrow in oil and light it, before shooting it. The flame didn’t die out even while passing through the air at incredible speed. Well, the speed [z] of the arrow is always greater than the wind’s, no matter from which direction it blows — opposite, behind or across. Why did I go to Agnivesha to learn the use of the flaming arrow rather than to a Vedic sage, to learn the secret formula of the fire ritual? Why did I distance myself from my fellow-students who went to study with the reputed Vedic seer, Krishna Dvaipayana, and go to Agnivesha, the reputed teacher of archery, specialising in the use of flaming arrows? Well, my nature lay in that. After all, one has to follow one’s nature,

and what I did then was right." This thought gave him mental satisfaction." Forgetting the sorrow of father's death, I studied with what enthusiasm! Morning, after-noon and evening, the teacher instructed me, and what I picked up from him I practised in four different ways till I perfected my skill. I learnt newer and newer techniques relating to the formation of the army, its overall disposition, its movement, invasion, seize and defence. Agnivesha had himself learnt them at his father's feet, and his passing them on to me was but the re-payment of a debt he owed to father, his Guru. This desire to re-pay a debt was what made him teach me with such zeal and commitment. This was something beyond the call of the normal duty of a teacher. Otherwise how can anyone give away knowledge so freely and completely?" Drona was filled with reverence and love for his Guru. He closed his eyes, driving his mind into the chamber of his memory, trying to recall of his Guru. Then his mind fixed itself for a few minutes on the picture of his Guru. But some noise outside disturbed him. Ashwatthama was eating in the kitchen, drinking sweet rice porridge in large containers, making an ugly noise. He wondered whether his son was incapable of eating and drinking without producing such repulsive sounds. After a while, the mind withdrew from the outside world, and journeyed back deep into itself." Yes, now I can see why Drupada then made friendship with me. Not only new items are coming to my notice, but old ones are now appearing in a new light, acquiring new perspectives. I am surprised that these things did not strike me till now. It was natural that dull students should cultivate the friendship of the more intelligent in order to take their help. This was all the more the case with me because I was not only intelligent, but I was also teacher's favourite. Not just dullards but also average ones took my help.

Drupada was no dullard. But he was not also above average. With what courtesy and friendship he used to approach me. He used to say, 'Drona, but for your company I would have fled from here. How can I go back home, after completing my studies leaving you here alone? How will I endure the separation? I have been struggling hard for the last fifteen days to learn to aim an arrow while swimming in the water. I cannot concentrate on aiming because my attention is wholly on the problem of how to keep the water out of my nose. Can you demonstrate to me in detail how to do it?' Or 'the Guru is very angry with me. Please put in a word in my favour. Will you tell him, finding a good opportunity, that Drupada is studying hard, and that he is not a lazy fellow* or 'Drona, you are like my elder brother. Do not decide to live anywhere else. After I ascend my throne, I shall offer you half of it. Why are you smiling in disbelief? I swear by the sun and the moon that I shall keep my word.' Like him, other friends, too, showered on me such extravagantly friendly promises! Only

Drupada was the most extravagant of them all. It seems his father, Prishata, was a friend of my father. Therefore, we are sons of friends. It was he who used to say often that we were friends because of that. Many kings used to come to father's hermitage. I don't remember all of them. As for father, he never regarded their friendship as worth much. I think now that father was wise in his thinking." Ashwatthama left after finishing his meal. Drona saw his shadow first and then the darkness produced by his body when it blocked the door. He turned to look that way, but his son had left by then. He was outside, scrubbing his horse briskly. Then his eyes turned towards the thatched wall opposite. He saw the bows stacked in a row. Arrows of various sizes stored in arsenals, swords, clubs, axes, spears and javelins. It appeared as if the wall was built with these weapons. His eyes caught them in one sweep." After finishing our education under Agnivesha, while the others left for their towns, I went in search of Bhargava for completing my studies. I was bitten with the bug of ambition, and aspired to master all the weapons. I was fired with the supreme ambition of gaining the reputation that there was no weapon in the world, which Drona had not mastered. In the matter of expertise in flaming arrows, Bhargava had gone further than Agnivesha. Bhargava was also an expert in wielding the axe. He could throw it with deadly accuracy at targets at long distances. Moreover, he belonged to the clan which had vowed to teach warfare only to Brahmins, never to Ksatriyas. After I had given my Brahmin identity by saying that I belonged to Angirasa lineage (Gotra), Drona by name a son of Bharadwaja, a Brahmin, I was admitted as a disciple. If only he had come to know my view that I considered his hatred of Ksatriyas unwarrantedly excessive, I would have been immediately expelled." His eyes were still focussed on the array of weapons stacked up against a thatched wall." He who has a little education becomes a king or a master. He controls the strings of administration. But those versed in many branches of knowledge, the genuine scholars, will have to feed themselves by serving those wielding the power of government. Or they can become teachers like me. But never masters. What mystery is this! Beautiful palaces, all instruments of pleasure, servant-maids, lovely princesses marrying them — all these are meant for the rulers, the wielders of governmental power. Though I was such an expert in weaponry, I could not get as wife, a good looking girl. This Drona is by no means a bad looking fellow, nor is he a dwarf. Perhaps a little on the thinner side. I could wield weapons to mince-meat ten Ksatriyas single-handed. My arrows can slice their heads in an instant. Yet, I was denied the right to compete in Svayamvaras. All the Svayamvaras were exclusively Ksatriya affairs. They are exclusively for the marriage of Ksatriya brides with Ksatriya bride-grooms. Ours remained the role of the priest who has to utter sacred words at the wedding! Of course, there were here and there some rulers who,

when such calamities as famine occurred, would find it necessary to offer their daughters in marriage to a Brahmin in order to gain their spiritual assistance in averting the calamity. Even then they did so most reluctantly, against their own will. Alas! This Drona bursting with sexual urges and a master of all weapons, could not get a beautiful girl in the prime of his youth. Well, otherwise how could you explain his joking himself in marriage to the sister of Kripacharya, a poor Brahmin serving the Hastinapur's palace? This girl, Kripe, could become attractive only when I was overpowered by the sexual urge! And she had grown up in terrible poverty. How could a girl brought up in circumstances of poverty and squalor muster enough self-confidence and skin to treat her husband with love and wifely arts? It seems her father was a Brahmin called Sharadvan, of the Gautama Gotra. Like me he too, had abandoned Vedic studies in search of archery. It seems, one day, a woman belonging to the tribe that supplied wood for making arrows, was hunting in the same Kuru country birds in the forest. She was alone. This sex-starved Brahmin invited that woman to quench his body's thirst. He forced her against her will, and impregnated her. She bore two children, a male and a female. None knows the details of how long they stayed together. Maybe one day or one month. He left her, never showing his face to her, after that. Later she fell very ill. She then met the old king, Santanu, and entrusted the children to his care, saying, 'These are your subjects. Bring them up like your own children.' Then she died. Santanu was fond of children. Perhaps his obsession with children was due to the fact that his wife from the hill tribes took away all her children and left them at her mother's place! After some days, I know not how many days after the children arrived in the palace, the old king himself died. The children lived on the margin of palace life, eating the left-overs and spoiled food. They showed the features of their mother's tribal origin. They were dark, short and stunted. Ten years later, after making enquiries, their Brahmin father came to the palace, and took them away. He taught his son archery. The son had studied for six or seven years when the father died. He returned to Hastinapura with his sister, and started to make a living by teaching the Süta boys the science of weaponry. He came to be called an Acharya, a teacher. He was paid the wages of an ordinary charioteer. Somehow he managed to bring up his sister. Poverty must have destroyed whatever grace nature might have granted her." The memory of his wife made Drona sad." She was not a bad sort, "he thought, "but mortally scared of me. She used to tremble with fear before me. Poverty had given her the patience to live with me in a modest style. She was totally devoid of ambitions and aspirations. Like her elder brother Kripacharya. How long could I stay with the elder brother of my wife? And what facilities were there in his household? With so much knowledge and skill, filling my head, my arms, my fingers, I was forced to wander for

livelihood..."Outside, the horse neighed so loud as to make the sound reach the skies. Then there was the thumping sound of its hooves. Wondering whether some other horse was attacking his horse, he rushed to the front door and saw his son Ashwatthama. His splendid horse was standing on its hind legs, raising its front legs high in the air. He had propped it up by supporting it with his hands so that it would stand like that. The confused horse was neighing madly. Drona thought that his fifty-five year old son was torturing the animal as if he was a fifteen-year old boy teasing a puppy. It made him angry, but mixed up with an element of pride, pride in his son's power and daring. He also thought his son to be somewhat foolish. He just stood there, watching. Ashwatthama was holding the horse. At last he let the horse down to stand on its four legs. It was his way to play with his horse as if it was a new horse to be tamed, and then mount it. Maybe, he did this to justify his name which meant the horse-bodied one. He had the forcefulness of a horse, and he just loved horses. Drona wondered how this powerful son came out of the short, frail body of his mother. Even as a baby he was unusually large, with long limbs and a generous body build. And his mother used to find it difficult to handle this heavy, big-sized baby. She was so weak that she could have died in giving birth to him! Of course, she did not live long after. Why did she die? Of course, it was due to poverty. But where did poverty first really start the damage? Let me recollect." Yes, that time we were living at Vrikasthala. Actually, Vrikasthala was an old name. They had cleared the place by hunting and killing the wolves infesting it. Not even a deer was available for meat. I was a husband who refused to beg. But the kitchen hearth had to be kept burning, cooking the food. So poor Kripe had to beg around for whatever she could get, and feed the three of us — myself, herself and the boy. And what about me? I didn't know any more than just to sit, despondent, my hands on my head. While the neighbouring children said, 'We drank milk', six-year old Ashwatthama would run to his mother in the hut, and ask her, 'Mother, I want milk'. He would cry and be obstinate. And where could she get the milk? She would mix the wheat flour collected through begging, with water, and then give it to the boy, saying it was milk! The boy drank it and felt happy, imagining he was really drinking milk. But the other children would seize him and mock at him. The boy didn't understand a thing. But she did. Maybe she found life too hard to endure? She handed the boy to me. She took to bed, wearing herself through sickness, she died after two months. She just faded out of our life.

It was then that I remembered my fellow-student, Drupada, who had declared that after education he would find it unbearable to live in his town without me! He had even promised, without any provocation, that he would share his throne with me equally. Had I known then the utter falsity of his friendship, I would not have

approached him, even if that meant death by starvation for me and my son. Well, I went to Drupada, partly walking the boy and partly carrying him, this heavy boy, on my shoulders. For how many days was it? How can I remember? It was fifty years ago. By the time we reached our destination, our skin and face had been burnt black in the scorching sun and our dress torn, and our bodies stinking strongly with sweat. We found it very nearly impossible to get admission into Drupada's palace. After reciting our genealogy and other details, we managed to gain admission at long last. And he chose to see us in the full court, not in the privacy of a room, looking down on us from his throne, half of which had been promised to me!

"What were my words? I said, 'Friend Yagnasena Drupada, I have come in search of you. I did not know that you are now on the throne. When did your father die? Please first arrange for the feeding of this hungry boy, and then we can talk. And there is plenty to talk about.' I moved closer to him with emotion. But the first words of his which tore my ears were, 'Sentry, how did you let this man into the court, without telling him how to behave and what to say bn such an occasion?' I felt as if my head was whirling. But I managed to say, 'Don't you recognise me? You used to call me your elder brother. I am none other than Drona, pet student of Agnivesha and your intimate chum.' Drupada, 'Yes, I see that you are my Guru's student. He seems to have taught you merely archery. What a pity he didn't teach you good manners. Teach you how to behave with whom.' What arrogance! He soon became grave, and added, 'If you are in a pitiable condition, I don't mind giving you refuge. But only on condition that you give up this nonsense of being a friend, claiming parity with me, and show me deference and fear in the court. Sentry, take them to the kitchen of the servants and have them fed.' Well, when has Drona tolerated insults and humiliation? I gave him back, 'You Yagnasena, if I do not bring down your arrogance, I am not a disciple of Agnivesha.' Immediately I left, dragging my son with me. I wonder when the arrogance of the Ksatriya will crumble! Of course, Drupada was not exceptional. It is the way of all rulers.

"Once again, back to roaming through many lands. It was while wandering like this that an idea struck me. No, to be precise, it was while I was coaching the Sütas of Trigartha country in archery, that the idea struck me. I was then wholly pre-occupied with the struggle for existence. I asked myself: How long are you going to live like this, eking out a precarious living? I felt that my great mastery over archery was a waste if I could not avenge the humiliation heaped on me by Drupada. It was there that my resolution to take revenge took shape and strength. It was there that I found an overriding cause to live for. Meanwhile I learnt that my brother-in-law, Kripacharya, had become a preceptor in archery to the sons of Dhritarashtra and Pandu. I had not seen him for ten or twelve years. Who knew about

my whereabouts? And who else but he deserved to know it? The memory of Kripacharya kindled Kripe's memory, and her memory stimulated me to see him. My son used to ask me, 'Father, you say that I have an uncle. He has never cared to come and see me even once. And you, too, have not cared to take me to him.' And Ashwatthama was quite a sight as he led me, with a bow on his shoulder, the quiver of arrows hanging from his back, and a sharp axe in his hand. In his company, one had no need to fear the wild animals — the tiger, the cheetah and the bear. He was then not as heavy-bodied as now. A tall boy, with the wide chest and a build like mine, spare and wiry.

Our Kripa is compassionate, but lacks understanding. He has no idea of Ksatriya arrogance and conceit. Or perhaps because since childhood he had been brought up under the patronage of the Hastinavati's rulers, he had developed a slavish attitude towards them! If he had been around, visiting a few hermitages, he would have realised the high status of a preceptor. He was an Acarya, preceptor, only in name. A very easy title granted by Bhishma. Wouldn't it have been below the status of the Kuru princes if they were taught by a person who did not have the status of an Acarya? Kripa was more worried about wages and facilities, than his self-respect. They paid him no more than what they paid to a supervisor of fifty horses. But he regarded that paltry reward as a great boon. He was overjoyed that he had been promoted from the status of a teacher of Sütas to that of a teacher of princes, children of Dhritarashtra and Pandu. When we met him, he said characteristically, 'Brother-in-law, we have to teach quite a few students. You are anyway an expert in many weapons. Why don't you stay with me as a partner in this work? I shall see Bhishma, tell him that you are my sister's husband, and persuade him to appoint you. He is very compassionate. I am sure he will not say, no. You will get a house to live in, enough grain, a cow to give you milk, and some salary. Would that suffice? I have remained a bachelor. Let's stay together, and not set up separate hearths to blacken our faces with soot as we try to kindle the fire with a blow-pipe!' Even to this day, he is like that. Like his sister. No high ambitions or aspirations. Just call him, Acarya, and he is content, his face expanding with pleasure. If I had agreed to this proposal, it wouldn't have made any essential difference — slaving for wages here rather than in Trigartha. That's all. This Drona would not have achieved anything more than mere belly-filling. I went with Kripa, and saluted Bhishma with respect. What arrogance and pride he showed! He was a celibate for life, an expert in Vedic studies, a brave warrior who had defeated a whole crowd of Ksatriya suitors at the Svayamvara of Kashi King's daughters to carry off the three brides for his step-brothers. He was so haughty tha t his eyes always turned skyward, never towards the

human beings before him! The archery learnt by the sons of Dhritarashtra and Pandu was pittance. It was beyond their comprehension when I took out a ball that had fallen into a deep well by shooting an arrow with a thread tied to it. That was the level of attainment of Kripa's disciples! Well, they got only their money's worth! Somebody said, 'Worshipful One, please teach us to use arrows in this way.' Who said this? Arjuna? Yes, it must be him. He was the boy who had a natural flair for picking up new skills, and the ability to learn new and special tricks of archery quite fast. I said, 'Child, it is against the custom to teach without a formal initiation into discipleship.' He fell at my feet, saying, 'Right now I am touching your revered feet, and begging you. Kindly accept me as your disciple and teach me.'

I told him, 'It can't be done this way, simply by a boy requesting for it. Elders will have to come and work out the arrangements.' The next day all the boys came to the same place in search of me. They said, 'Our grand-pa has asked us to take you to him. Please come.' I said, T am not a subject of your grand-pa. Hence I am not obliged to obey his orders. If he wishes, I shall leave this kingdom right now. Moreover I am a devotee of knowledge, committed to truth. Such seekers of truth are under nobody's control, and arc servant to no ruler. You are yet small boys. You won't understand this subtlety of Dharma. Convey to your grand-pa what I have spoken.' Within half an hour, revered Bhishma came running to me. Thus was restored this Drona's faith in life, and this gave him a strong grip over worldly affairs. Bhishma said, 'Having heard about your mastery over archery and your knowledge of the finer points of Dharma, I take you to be a great Acarya in archery. Please display to us some of your dexterity in wielding the bow and arrow. The palace will honour you with the gifts and rewards you desire.' I answered, 'Our blessings be upon the Maharaja. I do not belong to the tradition of the acrobats who show their cleverness and collect their rewards.' Bhishma said, 'No, that was not my intention. Isn't it according to the established norms that, before appointing a teacher, the teacher's suitability should be tested?'

Drona, 'Great ruler, I have no intention to take up a teacher's job with you. How can a person appointed by a king be a genuine Guru? The Guru has absolute liberty to accept or reject those aspiring to learn at his feet. Let's leave aside that matter. You are a noble Ksatriya. I have learnt that you are a master of weapons. You show your skills, and I shall show mine. If there are any common aspects we can share and enjoy, let's do so.'

"When all is said and done, Bhishma has the ability to recognise and appreciate quality. Or was it recognition of merit and ability in me or the selfish desire to have his grand-children taught things none

had taught them? Of course, it must have been both. Bhishma said, Acarya, you must live in our country. The residence, the place of Acarya's study, and the place of his teaching, and the land to enable him to maintain his livelihood, and the gifts offered to him, all these are his property, and the king shall have no jurisdiction over them. I shall abide by this rule. At the end of the education of my grandchildren, I promise to give you as the teacher's fee whatever you wish. Let your hermitage be set up in our Hastinavati. Let our children benefit from your knowledge'...

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Chapter

47

HE heard Ashwatthama's voice outside. He heard him say, "Why uncle, have you come on foot?" He knew that Kripacharya had come. And his arrival cut off the thread of his memory. It made him somewhat disgusted. No doubt, his journey through memory didn't make him happy exactly, but it certainly did absorb his attention. No matter in what field, Drona admired unreservedly mental concentration. He heard Kripa tell his son, "Child, what shall I do? In the hurly-burly of this war, who will let me have a chariot? I want to ride a horse at least. But how can I climb an unknown animal, which would most likely throw me off its back?" Drona wondered, "Where is his tent?" He had not enquired about it earlier. He had forgotten to do it. He felt happy Kripa had himself sought him out. Drona shouted from inside, "Ashwatthama, send your uncle inside." He was semi-dark in complexion, short in stature, and emaciated in body. He came in, and, sighing with tiredness, he sat down by himself on the floor. He said, "Ho w many horses, how many chariots, how many soldiers! Was there such a massive fighting force assembled even during the war between the Raksasas and us, under the leadership of the Lord of the Devas, Indra?" Drona interrupted his speech to order Havya to spread a mat for Kripa to sit on. Havya immediately took the mat, and unrolled it. Then he fetched from inside honey and water. Kripa said, "Oh, I see you are supplied honey. You are given a separate tent for yourself, and a separate servant. You are on par with a king." Then he took the leaf on which the honey was served.

"Where is your tent?"

"Difficult to say. Can you see over there? Of course, not. You know the place where the army of Mahishmatipura is camping. Beyond that is a hut. Very small one. Small or big, it does not matter for a fellow like me who is crumbling himself. When I was sleeping in the night, all sorts of supply personnel rushed into it. They snored loudly all the time while their bodies exuded an awful smell of sweat. Your part of the camp is much better. You have to put up with only horse-dung. But in my part we have to wrestle with the terrible stench of human excretion. Not much from horse-dung."

"Did you have your meals?" Drona enquired.

"What does it matter where this body feeds? Even one handful in excess will upset it. They gave me the food eaten by the common soldiers. At my age, is it possible to chew such coarse food? And who will take the pains to prepare for me a softer food? If I swallow it without chewing it, I shall end up with indigestion and stomach-ache."

Drona had lost two of his canine teeth, one at each end. The tooth next was loose, but still not painful. Kripa was five years younger, but had only seven or eight teeth left, loose and shaking. That was what he had himself said. Of course, none had searched the inside of his mouth to count precisely the number of missing teeth! Poor Kripacharya, he was not free to eat or even to speak, until those teeth fell of their own accord. Drona had taken his own personal servant to the war. Though he was his servant, his wages and provisions came from the palace. Since Kripa had from the beginning the status of one who cooked his own food, the question of a servant did not arise in his case.

Kripa was thinking, "This is a spacious tent. Also I can tell Havya to cook soft food. If I lie down near the thatched wall, I can at least get some sleep." But he felt some embarrassment at such thought, and it showed on his face. So far he had never pleaded for any favours of this kind. Dronacharya took pity on his brother-in-law. Even after he assumed the position of Acarya in Hastinavati, Dronacharya could have lived in Kripa's house itself. And Kripa had tried to persuade him to do so. But Drona felt that it would bring down his status as an Acarya, if he lived with a person who had all his life survived on the mercy and largesse of the palace. Moreover Kripa and his sister who had been entrusted by the tribal woman who had borne them, to Santanu, had been given names by the royal priest, names which proclaimed their living on the charity of the palace. These names had stuck, names r never given through a proper naming ceremony. Kripa could have' assumed the name of Gautama on the ground that he belonged to the Gautama or Sharadwan lineage. But he did not take care to propagate his lineage. The result was that Kripa was equated with Kripã or grace of the king by the people of Hastinavati> who were ignorant of his lineage. Or they also equated it sometimes with God's grace! Drona looked at him. His old body was about to yawn because of lack of rest and food. He was smacking the honey on the leaf, squatting on the mat.

Drona asked, "Why did you come here?" Finding that Kripa did not get the hang of his question, Drona clarified, "I mean, why did you choose to come to the battle-field in your condition?" Kripa put down the leaf, then drank water, and wiped off the remnants of honey on

his lips. Then he spoke, "Well, Maharaja Duryodhana sent a message to me personally, which said, ‘You must come to the war. We are there to fight, but we want you to bless us and guide us. You must come.’ That shows the nobility of his mind. How could I refuse to come?"

"Well, on what matters did he seek, and you offer guidance?" Kripa failed to catch immediately the irony implied. No, he did understand the question all right. But he didn’t know what to say in answer. It took him two moments to realise that he did not know how to reply. Drona softened, and said, "Why don’t you return home when you cannot even stretch your limbs and rest briefly? If you are interested, I shall arrange for a chariot to take you back." Kripa realised that Drona was suggesting that the best way to convey his resentment at the treatment meted out to him was to return home, and felt like going away that very minute. Kripa thought, "Returning home I can sleep in comfort. I can drink a whole mug of milk. This fellow Duryodhana encouraged me to come here, and here nobody cares for me. I suppose they are wondering what this old man with infirm limbs can do in a war. He remembered that the persons who had invaded his tent the previous night had been saying as much. When he had almost decided to go home, Drona called Havya and ordered, "Look, cook rice soft for Kripacharya, Or if you have maize flour, mix it with honey and give it. Adding milk. Have you any milk left?

"Very little."

Kripacharya approved enthusiastically, "You mean maize flour? It is delicious." He went out through the back door of the hut, and washed his feet. Then he sat down in the kitchen and started eating maize flour, honey and milk. But he didn’t know that they had mixed it with hot water because of shortage of milk. When the dish which could be eaten without chewing comforted his belly, then he started to enjoy it further by letting it linger on his tongue. He thought, "Of course, I can go back. But what would the residents of my street say? The neighbouring women and children used to say that Guru Kripacharya might have a thin body, but he had a sharp mind over matters concerning warfare. If now I return home to let the war be fought in my absence, what would they say? And suppose Duryodhana does not take me back into service?" Havya interrupted his thought, "Milk is finished. There is plenty of honey. Shall I pour another half a leaf-cup?" Kripa stretched his hand to indicate a negative answer, and said, "If the sweet increases, you feel as though your face is being rubbed!"Then he shouted to his brother-in-law sitting outside in the ritual hall, "After all, this is war. There is all this effort to look after so many people. I am sure that is why Maharaja Duryodhana has not been able to take care of me personally. And also he may not be aware of my whereabouts in such a vast camp...."

The sound of the drums came once again from outside. Drona cocked his ears to listen to it, wondering whether it meant another message. He did not catch the words of Kripa, as he was too absorbed in the drummer's message. He went and stood outside. Neither Ashwatthama nor his horse was there. The horses tethered in one spot were champing and chafing in the sun. The atmosphere exuded a rank smell rising from the horse-dung and the rotting grass. The camp-dwellers had reconciled to this condition as natural for the period of the war. The grooms in charge of the horses realised that the animals had not been watered. They thought that Ashwatthama must have gone to enquire about the supply of water to the horses. The sound of the drum came closer, and a little distance from the tent of Drona was visible the elephant carrying the drummer-announcer. The horses neighed in fear at the sound of the drum. Drona wondered, "If these horses are so scared by the drum, what will they do when the war starts?" Cursing whoever had trained them, he heard the drum- beating cease and the message: "Those who believe that the Pandavas belong to this lineage according to Dharma, can go over to their side..."The same thing, and Drona asked himself why this message was announced so frequently. Or was it simply that they were covering different parts and this appeared like a repetition of the message? Meanwhile he became aware that his nose was now getting used to the foul smell. He tested this by taking a deep breath, and found that it was true. £Jot knowing what else to do, he stood there for a while casting his eyes all a round. Suddenly he saw elephants, standing row upon row, almost endlessly. Drona thought, "Where did so many elephants come from? I had no idea that Duryodhana had acquired so many of them." He felt like climbing a near-by tree and survey the sea of elephants. Close by to the right, there was a Büruga tree. But he was disappointed that it was beyond him to climb it even with a ladder. Suddenly he felt a sort of joy. The sound of the drum was receding. The stench of dung was unbearable. He was puzzled at the wayward behaviour of his nose, now tolerant of the stench and now unable to bear it. Then he realised that most of his face was dominated by his prominent nose. It was a long nose, terminating in a sharp end. The drum-beating stopped. He guessed that they must be announcing the same message, though he could not hear it.

When Dronacharya went back into his tent, he found Kripacharya lying on the mat. He seemed to be dozing. He sat down noiselessly. Even then Kripa got up quickly as if he sensed mentally Drona's arrival. Because he sat now close to ritual hearth, the rhythm of Drona's smelling changed. Though he wanted to be indifferent to the situation, his nose automatically began to take long breaths. The eyes of Kripa sitting opposite to him, stared hard at Drona, and Drona was aware of it. He felt some mental and physical constriction. Some pain

emerging from the depth. Drona felt confused about the why's and what's of the situation. He was consumed with a desire to know whether his stomach was turning because of the mixing up of the stench of urine and faeces with the aroma of the ritual burning. Kripa said to Drona, "You are better off. You can perform your fire rite here itself. Yesterday and today I filled my belly without performing the rite. How should I get the facility for it? At least I will have mental satisfaction by performing it this evening in your company. Anyway you have a jar-full of ghee." Drona was suffering from an acute stomach upset. Stomach ache, loose motion, uncontrolled urination and defecation, head-ache, body-ache were all natural afflictions at the time of a war, as Drona well knew. And he knew all about how to cure them, more than anybody else in the camp. He had a stock of a variety of medicines in his tent. Even his servant, Havya, knew what powder or herbal potion to administer for what disease. But Drona realised that what bothered him was not the fear of war. He who had trained in warfare knew for certain that, in this terrible and unparalleled war in Aryavarta, the greatest warriors on both sides, couldn't suffer such war ailments. Yet it had started feeling an acute pain in the pit of his belly. It had started all of a sudden. Kripacharya got up, saying, "The sun is already leaning westward. We can take it to be evening. I shall perform the fire rite just now. It will give me peace of mind." He went inside to pick up the twigs and sticks, cleared the ash in the ritual hearth without upsetting the fire, and then placed the twigs and sticks in it. After that he went out to wash his mouth, hands and feet. Returning to the hearth, he sat near it with a container with ghee and a ladle. No sooner did he fan the hearth than the fire blazed. Chanting the sacred words of the ritual, he poured ghee into it. The twigs and sticks began to crackle, and the pleasant aroma of the ghee began to pervade the room. The flames hissed and blazed.

As Kripa was performing the fire rite, Drona's stomach pain grew more acute. Dronacharya felt the urge to retch, but withheld it after great struggle because he did not want to get up and go when the ritual was being performed. Going out would have meant disrespect to ritual fire. His mind started to wander away. He sat still with closed eyes. Kripacharya did not take a long time over his worship. His was a short-cut procedure, involving a few sacred formulae he thought important and which he had learnt from his father. He quickly recited the Agnenaya stanza, pouring the rest of the ghee, and then went round the fire three times as part of the ritual. As he returned to the mat, Drona said to Kripa, "Did you listen to the beating of the drum?" Kripa answered, "Yes. The sound reached the spot where I was sitting."

"They say that everybody has the choice to decide to join any side they thought acted according to Dharma or to withdraw from the

war altogether. What do you think is the right Dharma in this r situation?"

"I don't need to consider the matter now. I have given the matter already my fullest attention. Dharma is on the side of the Pandavas, I am convinced. King Pandu's wives had children through the Niyoga procedure with their husband's consent. Even if his wives had Niyoga children after his death, Dharma still sanctions it. In either case, the children will be Pandu's according to Dharma. Therefore it is against Dharma to say that the Pandavas do not belong to the Kuru lineage. But I am bound by Dharma to support the person whose food I have eaten. Shouldn't my loyalty be to the household that fed me from childhood?"

"Isn't Duryodhana a child before you, in age? You were brought up by Santanu first, and later Bhishma. If this is true, where is the need for you to show your loyalty to Duryodhana?"

"It would have been best if I had accompanied the Pandavas when they went to Khandavaprastha. But I stayed behind in Duryodhana's court."

Drona thought that this was not a matter to be treated lightly. But then he remembered that he, too, had remained in Hastinavati after Duryodhana ascended the throne.

Kripa added, "Moreover, Duryodhana has been treating me with respect. He has given me permanent seat in his court. I am regularly invited to attend all sessions of the royal court. My food and other requirements come to me in one package for the whole year."

Drona remembered that his status in the court was much higher than that of Kripa. His residence was a grand mansion. As large as Bhishma's . He had servants, milching cows, horses, and four chariots. But all these facilities were at the mercy of Duryodhana. Drona had enough gold. He asked himself, "When the Pandavas went to Khandavaprastha, why didn't I go with my pet disciple, Arjuna, to live in that new town?" As the last ladle of ghee was poured, the flames from ritual fire became reduced to embers, but the pleasant aroma of ghee was thick in the air. As the aroma had filled the whole tent, there was no need for them to take deep breaths to enjoy it.

"You should consider one more thing. It was revered Bhishma who brought me up from early boyhood. Have we studied Vedic lore as deeply and extensively as Bhishma? Who understands Dharma better than he? Since he has agreed to be the Supreme Commander of Duryodhana's army, perhaps the claims and rights of the Pandavas may not be very strong."

Drona was inclined to agree with these words. But his immediate

reaction was anger. He was unable to understand why. However, the fact that he was not brought up by Bhishma gave him some satisfaction. His thought was interrupted by Kripa who said, "As for myself, I have grown under Bhishma's kindness and patronage. You were the one who agreed to his request and set up a school for archery. Also you are a sovereign of an independent territory .Therefore, you have greater independence in interpreting Dharma than I."

By the time he completed the question, "What independent territory?" Drona found an answer to his own question. Kripa replied, "North Panchala in the Ahicchaira territory. Won from Drupada."

Drona said to himself, "Yes, won from Drupada. All my disciples,sons of Dhritarashtra as well as sons of Pandu and also sons of the servant-maids, had completed their training under me, and had won reputation in the entire Aryavarta as the most accurate shooters of arrows. This reputation brought me students from long distances. Overjoyed at his grand-sons' progress in archery, Bhishma had organised a ceremony to worship the preceptor, the Guru. I did not tell him my wish until Bhishma came to get my consent for the ceremony. When I told Bhishma that I wanted as Guru fee the arrest of Drupada and the chaining of his leg to a leg of my cot, though the old warrior was inwardly happy that he got one more opportunity to take revenge on his old enemy, the Panchalas, he didn't show it. Instead he pretended to think deeply about it, and put on a grave visage. Then he got together all his grand-children, sons of both Pandu and Dhritarashtra, and organised an attack on Drupada." Drona reflected, "That was the first and the last time that the rival kin joined hands to fight a common enemy. If only this unity had been sustained, the Kuru territory would have been expanded significantly. In any case, the strategy I had worked out involving Bhima's bravery, Arjuna's skill in archery and the enthusiasm of Duryodhana and his brothers, paid off. If only Bhima had been allowed to rush, he would have most certainly killed Drupada in a rage. And who wanted that? Arjuna is my ideal disciple. He understood his teacher's mind, and worked out the right strategy. He managed to isolate Drupada from his soldiers, arrested him and physically subjugated him. Then he tied him with ropes, bundled him into the chariot, and brought him over to my place. I was still asleep on my cot made of good teak wood, with thick legs. He tethered Drupada to the leg of my cot, who whimpered like a puppy. He spoke derisively to him, 'You fellow, don't whimper like a dog. It will disturb my Guru's sleep. As my leg touched his head, I said, 'I am sorry. Forgive me. I should not have hit this crowned head.' Then I said to Arjuna, Disciple, what is it touching my leg.' Then I sat up, and tensed my body, and said to Drupada, 'Oh, my dearest friend,

Drupada,how can you sit there on the floor? After all, we are equals because we were both disciples of a common Guru. We must sit together, whether at the foot of the cot or on the throne.' Then Drupada said, 'Pease untie the ropes round my legs and hands. I shall acknowledge my defeat. I shall prostrate before you. Forgive me with generosity.' Then I said, 'Arjuna, loosen the ropes a little. After all, he is my classmate. We are equals.' Then he said, 'The northern part of Panchala and the southern part are evenly divided by the Ganga. You take the entire north, and leave me the southern part. Save me from the infamy of having lost the whole of my ancestral inheritance. Please don't kick me. I shall bow to you in reverence.'..."

Kripa spoke, "Why, have you forgotten? Panchala was halved, and the northern half containing Ahicchaira he gave you, keeping for himself, the southern portion containing Kampilya. No, perhaps it is more true to say that you gave him that half, and sent him away satisfied. In any case, you have that kingdom. If you don't like Hastinavati, you can shift to Ahicchaira, and get a throne carved there for yourself..."Then Kripacharya started coughing.

Drona thought to himself, "When I told Duryodhana bluntly that I would not participate in this war, Duryodhana said suggestively, 'Even the animals support their master in his difficulties. If even you talk like this, revered one, what will be my fate?' Duryodhana used the argument of the obligation owed to the feeding master. But back then he was a mere youth playing with bow and arrow. Yes, now I see it in a flash. How easily and cleverly Bhishma, in my name, brought about the annexation of northern Panchala. to the Kuru kingdom. I should have seen through it earlier. Well, even now, why should I not go to Ahicchaira, build a palace and get carved a throne for myself, control the reins of government, become an equal of the rulers, I who am the Guru of these rulers in knowledge and the science of warfare, perform myself rites and rituals, and earn spiritual merit? I was a damned fool, and I let Bhishma gobble up the territory that belonged to me..."After clearing his congested throat with a couple of coughs, Kripacharya said, "Great Preceptor, why didn't you tell me earlier that he had humiliated you? You gifted away generously half the kingdom. Otherwise that fellow Drupada would have been a beggar. Your generosity is capacious. But I must say that it was shown to an undeserving person." But Drona knew better. He said to himself, "If I had not given away half of the kingdom to Drupada, Bhishma would have gobbled up the whole Panchala to extend the Kuru land. Very easily and very cunningly, Bhishma expanded the kingdom. The only Guru fee I got was the useless one of having the satisfaction that Drupada was tethered to the leg of my cot, and of kicking his head with my foot! The fee of territory was just gobbled up by him, using up my learning, skill in war strategy and my qualities of leadership, to promote his own

interests. How astutely he saw to it that I had to depend on the palace for filling my belly..."Just then Kripa got up and announced, "I shall sleep there!", pointing to the kitchen. He left with the rolled mattress. Left alone in the smoky smell of the ritual hearth, Drona became suddenly angry with the entire tribe of rulers. He said to himself, "These fellows have all the pleasures of this world. They get large residence as administrators, a fully decorated wife for chief queen, plenty of servant-maids, and in the names of defending the country chariots, horses and elephants, and a share in what people grow under the pretext of defending the city. As if these were not enough, all rituals and rites are conducted in their name so that they gain plenty of merit in the other world. And we who are constantly immersed in study, have to compile their life-histories, attributing to them the achievements of the country as a whole, shower inordinate praise on them, recount the glorious deeds of their ancestors to ignorant masses. Damn it, I am a fool. Why didn't I then go to northern Panchala as a ruler? These fellows want every worldly pleasure, the most beautiful women! What they deserve is what in the past was meted out to them by Bhargava Jamadagnya Parasurama, Parasurama..."Drona recollected his student days. After finishing his education with Agnivesh, when he had approached the school of Jamadagni of the Bhargava lineage for further studies, how closely he was examined. They had not given up their practice of refusing instruction in weaponry and warfare to Ksatriyas. One should listen to their own account of how they cut down the Ksatriyas. Renuka was a Ksatriya girl. Simply because she married the sage Jamadagni, always immersed in studies, how could Renuka give up her Ksatriya pleasures? A lover of knowledge, Jamadagni embraced poverty. Chitraratha who was aware of Renuka's desires and inclinations, tempted her with his wealth. He visited Jamadagni's hermitage often, pretending to be a seeker of knowledge, showing outwardly the loyalty of a disciple, so that he could gain the sage's trust. How could the men and women of the ruling caste,brought up in every luxury, possess the power to control their five senses? Though she was his mother, Parasurama did not hesitate to cut off her head because she was unfaithful to her husband.." Ashe said this to himself,Drona's head bowed of its own accord as a homage to Parasurama. Finally Parasurama killed Chitraratha as well, thus putting an end to two sinners. Then Parasurama finished Kartaviryarjuna, who had attempted to raid the hermitage. Kartaviryarjuna's son had killed Jamadagni in his absence. To avenge his father's death, Parasurama raised an army, and systematically decimated the rulers of Aryavarta,and let their blood run into rivers. It is claimed that there never was, is and will be a wielder of the axe, equal to Parasurama. Well, I also think that all sin originates in the rulers, and that they are the creators of all injustice and immorality. Parasurama should be born again, and must once again fight the

twenty one wars to destroy the entire race of rulers, a race addicted to drinking, gambling, whoring and warring for conquest of territory. Then suddenly Dronacharya got up, and picked from the stored weapons, resting against the thatched wall, an axe with a wooden handle. He asked himself, "Even today who can wield this weapon with the dexterity of the Bhargava lineage? I was the only person to have learnt it from them. I am proud of it. If I rotate it, none can stay anywhere near it. It is a single-blow weapon. With just one blow on any part of the body it would let out a river of blood. Now nobody seems to pay attention to this splendid weapon. This is the age of the bow and arrow, weapons that attack, the enemy from a distance. The use of old and traditional weapons is almost extinct." Then his right hand began to rotate the weapon. Drona thought, "This is no weapon for a person at my age. It needs youth, power. This is the weapon that suits Ashwatthama. perfectly. If he goes wielding it, he will be another Parasurama. How sad that, incapable of independent thinking, he is rusting in Duryodhana's kitchen!..."Drona's wrath against Bhishma revived." Yes, the entire ruling race must be demolished. Parasurama fought twenty one wars to wipe them out from Aryavarta. Unfortunately, the race sprouted again. Now grown into a mighty tree. The other plants, creepers and trees have become manure for this tree. How was it Parasurama let it grow again? In order to expiate the sin of killing so many kings, he performed rites and gave as ritual gift the kingdom he had won to sages and mendicants and teachers like his father. Then he went off to perform a great penance. The Ksatriya women, bereft of the male members of their caste, underwent Niyoga with the sages, mendicants and teachers of the Brahmin caste and begot children. The sages, mendicants and teachers who had given them children retreated into their hermitages and scholarly pursuit of knowledge, wisdom and salvation. The ruling caste began to flourish once again. The old order came to be restored. Why didn't Parasurama himself rule? Why didn't he inject Dharma into government? Why didn't the new Ksatriyas born to the seeds of sages and mendicants go after establishing dharma and seek knowledge?"

Several such questions crowded into Dronacharya's mind. And before they could be clearly delineated and deciphered, his mind went out of action, all of a sudden and inexplicably. All he could discern was the shadow of anger left behind. Whenever he was in a mental anguish or confusion, Drona was given to brisk walking up and down. Putting the axe back in its position, he went on walking up and down restlessly in the room. But the space was very small, and didn't allow him more than seven or eight steps. He came out of his hut, but there was no empty space outside either. No space for the kind of walking he wanted. The whole area was over-run by horses, soldiers, horse-dung, urine and defecation, and their rank smell. Only

if one could get away from , all this in a chariot, then one could walk a hundred or a thousand steps. But he had no idea which direction would take him most quickly out into empty space. Moreover, it was an unwritten rule that during the war one should not indulge in such movements. He remembered that he himself had taught this rule to his students and asked them to follow it strictly. It was time for sunset. In the reddish light of the setting sun, the dust became clearly visible. There was dust all over the place. Just then, Havyaka shouted from behind, "It is evening. I have made arrangements for the fire rite." He took a jug of water to Drona, where he was standing. Before washing his mouth, face, hands and feet, Drona felt like urinating. The question was where he should go to do it. There was no clean spot bereft of men and animals. He took some eight steps to do it behind a stone slab. After washing, he went inside and sat before the ritual hearth. It was then that his nose felt the difference from the smell outside. As he fanned the twigs just catching fire, he thought, "Why the devil didn't I then go to Ahicchaira and crown myself a king? Drupada spoke with such clarity, 'Drona, the whole of Panchala is now yours. You have gifted me one half. You rule the other half. I shall render you every help in your new role as a ruler.' Yes, now I can see in retrospect that, though it was never his genuine desire that I rule, he was more anxious that the territory should not be gobbled up by Bhishma for the Kurus. This message was perhaps hidden in his words. How stupid of me not to have seen all this then! I just closed my eyes thinking that he was speaking ironically or for the sake of appearing polite. I who had climbed to the pinnacle of being a great Acarya lacked totally the sharpness in worldly affairs that Ksatriya showed!"The twigs caught fire. Even as he was chanting the sacred ritual words, he was aware that his mind continued to be troubled by the same issue. As he poured the last drop of ghee into the ritual hearth, the flame blazed, lighting the whole inside of the hut. His mind assured him that not just he, but no Acarya could be as worldly wise as a Ksatriya. In fact, he will have no practical sense at all! He was now certain. He asked himself, "What was it that Parasurama achieved? Out of rage, he went all out to destroy the Ksatriya caste. He exterminated the ruling caste. But he himself refused to rule. Like retreating after one had successfully seized the fort! It is because of the quality with which this Acarya caste is born! Perhaps. It seems to be its nature to rouse itself in passion and anger at something. Then it stares at the sky, lost in dreams, engaging itself in mastering old ritual formulae and creating new ones.

Indifference to all worldly goods excepting a fistful of cooked rice and a piece of cloth. If somebody can grant them these, they fall flat at his feet, praise him to the skies, and bless him inordinately..."The colour of the flames in the hearth turned yellow. It was not burning steadily, not maintaining a constant height. It was flighty and fidgety,

jumping most waywardly. Then it is slowly tapered off to merge with the embers. The smoky aroma was thick in the air. Drona drew a long breath. Outside there was the endless cacophony of countless horses neighing. In the distance, there was the trumpeting of the elephants. Drona had not been aware of these sounds all this while. He shouted, "Havyaka, it is getting dark. Light a lamp and bring it in here." As Havyaka was putting the lamp down, Drona instructed, "No, not there. Here in the corner. Otherwise the wind will blow it off. Has the milk arrived? Oh, yes, I know it is not very likely. I don't want to eat rice. Just mix corn flour with a little honey. That would do. Not right away. After a while. What is Kripacharya doing?"

"He is still asleep. He said that the whole of the previous night, he didn't have even a wink of sleep."

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Chapter

48

DRONA sat still, watching the flame in the wick filled with neem oil. Now and then the inner silence was interrupted by noise made by horses and elephants outside. After a short while, someone pushed the door of the hut and entered. The new entrant stood at the door and stared in Drona's direction. Wasn't it Maharaja Duryodhana? Yes, it was him all right. He had a crown, epaulettes, and the dazzling garment. There was a metal jacket to protect his chest, dhoti in the warrior style, a sword hanging from the waist, and a bow hanging from the shoulder. On his back, the quiver of arrows. No, it couldn't be him. This one was shorter than Duryodhana. His chest, too, was narrower. It was dim in the room. , Drona thought, "It is a small lamp, and at ninety my sight is none too good." Before he could ascertain his identity, the visitor prostrated before Drona's feet. He fell absolutely flat on the ground. Drona wondered who this ruler could be, who showed such great devotion to his Guru. He had taught countless students. As far as he recollected, none of them had shown such devotion. These Ksatriya rulers became swollen-headed when they ascended a throne, even before a Guru. All they did was just join the palms and give a bow, pretending to be deferential. What would be his country? He asked Drona, 'Don't you recognise me, your disciple, Sir?' He spoke in pure Aryan language. Only there was some trace of an accent. What was his country? Different countries pronounced the Aryan language with different accents. In order to be polite, he replied, 'Yes, how can I not recognise you? Get up, king. Are you doing well? Havyaka, bring the honey dish.' He came closer and sat on the mat pointed out by Drona. Still, Drona didn't recognise him. The face was not very sharply visible in the dim light. Dark skinned but in an Aryan garb.

'You still are not able to remember me. My name is Ekalavya. Your student.'

Drona didn't openly ask him, Ekalavya, who he was. He sat staring at the face.

"Look here, son. I have taught countless boys at different times. And when you grow old, your faces change beyond recognition. Our

memory also tends to dim. Mere mentioning of name does not kindle my memory. When and where did you happen to be my student? Do not get angry with me, please. I am a very old man. And it must have been thirty or thirty-five years ago, when you were my student. That's what I think. Tell me any other details that can help me to identify you."

"See, this is the best identification "He extended his right hand. There were only four fingers and the thumb was missing. Was he born without that thumb? No, it didn't look like it. There was clear indication of its having been cut off. Yes, he remembered, and felt a constriction in the pit of his stomach, as sweat drops appeared on his skin, and his eyes suddenly went blind. He was the son of the chief of the Nisada tribe inhabiting the forests between the Kuru and Panchala countries. His father wanted this son of his to study under me, as he had heard that princes from far off lands came to study under me. He approached me to accept his son as my student, loading me with gifts of the forest such as pots o' honey, baskets of fruit, elephant tusks, antlers, mat made of deer leather, twelve pieces of tiger skin. The boy showered on me devotion. He had already acquired skill in archery sufficient to enable him to shoot at pouncing tigers. He possessed incredible , courage, having been brought up amidst tigers, snakes and' elephants. He came of a tribal group which had never been inside a chariot. As soon as I saw' him - or was it his father? - then, I grew warm and affectionate. Why? He reminded me of my dead wife -the same sort of face, sharp cheeks, size of the eyes, the shape of the nose, dark complexion, and easy laughter. Was that woman who slept with Sharadvanta to produce the twins also from the same forest tribe?"

"Revered Guru, did you recognise me?"

Drona said, "Yes, "But saying it was not easy, as he felt his breath choking. He stared at his face in the dim light, but found no signs of hatred or contempt, but the same genuine devotion.

"Why did you come now?"

"I came to fight in this war. On your side. With all my army."

"Are you now a king?"

"Yes. After father's death, I ascended the throne. Twenty-years ago. I was keen on inviting you to attend my coronation ceremony. But I was not sure of what your beloved disciple, Arjuna, would say. So I didn't do so and had to forego the good fortune of receiving your blessings..."

Dronacharya took in the whole of Ekalavya with his eyes. His father was the chief of the Nisada tribe. But he had never donned like

his son the customary dress of an Aryan king - crown, warrior style dhoti, and epaulettes. Drona had no idea of their custom before they adopted the Aryan ceremony of coronation. He recalled his father's dress — soft leather round his waist, exposed chest, and a head-gear of colourful birds' feathers. The ordinary people used to wear a head-gear made of woven bamboo. They used to wear a garland of multi-coloured flowers. But this fellow, Drona thought, was wearing copper bangles round his wrists. Drona got over the first feelings of confusion on knowing about his identity. Now his memory began to clear up. Testing his wrist and hand movement, his courage and his devotion to the Guru, Drona had accepted the boy of a low status as his disciple but the other students had thumbed their noses at him! They must have asked the question: How can a non- Aryan boy study in the company of Aryan boys? He, too, was somewhat embarrassed, feeling out of place. He didn't know in the beginning the Aryan language. But he tried to pick it up slowly. Whenever he pronounced a word wrongly, they would laugh at him to his face. But when it came to accuracy of aiming and skill with the bow, how they felt silenced by him! Drona recalled, "One day, Bhishma called me and said, 'Acarya, I learn that you are instructing our princes in the company of some boy from the forest. For some reason, the boys are not happy with it. And, of course, it would also bring down the status of the royal family/1 did not grasp the full meaning of his words. Well, I had to isolate him from the others and allow him to practice and study by himself. Can a teacher think of a greater joy than imparting knowledge to a boy so highly motivated and devoted, and with such an inborn ability for accurate aiming and unflinching fortitude? He was shifted to the forest on the other bank of Ganga, and he, too, must have felt relieved to be rid of their company! I used to cross the river in a boat once in a way to instruct him. The princes came to know about my trips across the river to teach him only when they had gone to that forest to hunt..."

Ekalavya pulled him back into the present, "Respected Guru, you regarded Arjuna as your dearest student, and for his sake demanded my thumb as your Guru fee. Now he has ranged against you in the war."

Drona did not detect any hint of irony or ridicule in his words. Yet he felt some inner constriction. He didn't say anything. Though the past stood before his eyes in vivid detail, he sat still and silent either because he did not know what to say or because he did not want to say anything. But Ekalavya continued, "It has been many years. Have you forgotten things? One day, all the princes crossed the river to hunt in the forest where I was residing. Maybe because it sniffed my presence, their dog barked very loudly: I had no idea whose dog it was. How could I know it? Taking it to be a wild dog, I aimed my arrow at it solely on the basis of its sound. The arrow went straight

into its mouth. The princes must have been astounded. Curious to find out the archer who could aim so precisely by merely following sound, they went in search of the person who had shot the arrow. The search led to me. They recognised me and asked me, 'Ekalavya, what are you doing here?' I replied, Well, I am studying.' They asked me, Who is your Guru?' I pointed to the inside of my hut. I had made a mud image of you, so that I could bow to it before practising on the days you couldn't come. They whispered among themselves that you had taught the forest boy better than themselves. But, as a matter of fact, it was not you who taught me this technique of aiming at the sound. We, forest folk, acquire an almost natural ability to discern the sounds of animals with their subtle nuances, and aim at them. Though you didn't teach me the technique, you told me its Aryan name, Sabdavedhi. Your Aryan boys knew the word well. But they lacked the aim and the imagination to execute it. Three days later you returned to my hut, your face wrinkled with worry. I asked you, 'Revered Guru, why is your face sorrowful?' You answered, 'Child, I seem to be guilty of a breach of promise. Can you save me?' I touched your feet and said, To save you, I am ready to offer my neck.' For a moment, you sat stunned, silent. I persuaded you to tell me. You answered, 'Child, I had vowed to make Arjuna the best archer. After seeing with his own eyes, your skill at Sabdavedhi, he has begun to taunt me that I am guilty of a breach of promise. How can you help me keep my promise?' But I did not then have the heart to say that I was not taught this technique by you. Whether it is true or false is not important for me. What was important then was that I shouldn't hurt my Guru. Then you wanted me to give you my right thumb. It was as good as losing entirely my command over the bow and arrow. Without a moment's hesitation, I cut off my thumb and offered it to you. Later, you got a medicinal herb, extracted its juice, and administered it. After the wound had cured you used to visit me stealthily and teach me how to shoot even with four fingers..."

Not knowing what further to say, he kept silent. All these words sat heavily on Drona's mind, pressing down, and making it impossible for him to lift his head. The silence of the burning lamp inside, the neighing of the horses and the trumpeting of the elephants didn't enter his mind. When Drona was trapped in silence, which kept all other noise out, Ekalavya continued, "Later I went back to my town. My father proclaimed that we should have nothing to do with the Aryans, that we should reject the Aryan style of devotion to the Guru, and the Aryan customs and practices. But after I became king, I followed closely the goings on in Hastinavati. I learnt about the present war between Duryodhana and the Pandavas. I came of my own accord with my own army, to oppose Arjuna who had been jealous of me, and, if possible, surround him with my men and finish him off. Only after reaching here, I learnt that you, too, were

opposing Arjuna."

At this point Drona felt the urge to speak. He was now keen on exploding a lie which he had created earlier under compulsion to conceal the secret of politics. He said, "Child, rulers from several countries have joined this war with a variety of motivations. You, too, have come. If you want to side Duryodhana, do so. I stand on his side. But the idea of taking revenge on Arjuna is like a sprout without a seed. I can assure you that the cause of your losing the thumb was not Arjuna."

Ekalavya's voice rose in emotion, "He was jealous of me because I was a better archer. Well, when I was in the school, he had expressed this openly to me."

"Which intelligent student in a class will not be fired by the ambition to be at the top? if Arjuna was also fired by such an ambition, would it be unnatural or unusual? It is true that Arjuna said things because of the liberties I allowed him. Do you think his words were sufficient to induce me to ask you to offer me your thumb? Did Arjuna at that time have the maturity to make such demands?"

"Revered teacher, at least now reveal the truth. Of whom are you afraid? I am there to support you."

"Well, my own mind has now reached a stage where it is afraid of none, I mean none. I shall tell you straight-away. It was true that these Ksatriya boys were stunned by your skill at Sabdavedhi. Even more significant was the fact that you had a copper bow. You, forest folk, generally have no bows excepting the bamboo ones. Even when you try to handle a metal bow, you do not know how to do it, unable to measure its tension and elasticity. How far can a bamboo bow shoot an arrow? Also the tip of your arrows contains poison, not sharp metal. Lighter arrows always have very little pace and impact. The arrow that struck the dog was metallic at its tip. It was the arrow I had supplied to you. Bhishma got to know of this through the boys. That very same night, he called for me and he asked me, In recent times, the forest tribes have stepped up their raids on us. They rush into Aryan villages] and loot grain. They also make off with our women. Now if you teach the son of the chief of such people the archery of the Aryans, wouldn't it amount to betrayal of the interests of our kingdom? Saying this is not enough. You must undo the harm. You must take back from him what you have wrongly given him. The only way this can be done is to have his right thumb sliced off.' Meanwhile, you forest folk had increased your commercial relations with the palace. Hadn't you started exchanging your forest products — cured skins of tigers and deer and other animals, tamed elephants, and honey, for our wheat? By then you had become addicted to the

taste of wheat. Hence, Bhishma did not want to spoil the relations with you, openly associating himself, as he was the de facto ruler, with the demand for cutting off of your thumb. Bhishma was a shrewd politician, and he set me up for the purpose. I simply used Arjuna as a pretext."

Ekalavya was non plussed and dumb-struck. Drona's own mind was in such turmoil that he was not in a position to say anything or to listen to anything. He was still unable to arrive at clarity. For a while, they sat opposite to each other, virtually strangers, each immersed in his own cogitation. Just then Havyaka, standing at the door inside, asked, "Kripacharya is still asleep. When I tried to invite him for dinner, he mumbled that he did not want to eat, and closed his eyes again. If you delay, the preparation ' of corn flour may become too soft and lose its taste."

"Bring food for both of us. This is my disciple, King of Nisada."

Ekalavya ate the prepared corn flour mechanically. So did Drona. By the time they were washing their hands, Ashwatthama arrived. When he opened the door, the wind that rushed in very nearly extinguished the lamp, making the flame flicker rapidly. But the huge body of Ashwatthama blocked the wind, and stabilised the wick. He did not recognise Ekalavya. He reported, "Father, Yuyutsu has disappeared all of a sudden. From the start he was talking in favour of our enemies. Suspecting that he might have gone over to the enemies, Maharaja Duryodhana has set servants to search him."

Drona sat silent after washing his hand. It didn't occur to him to remind his son of the old acquaintance between him and Ekalavya. Ekalavya got up and prostrated before Drona, bowed to him with devotion, and said, "I had promised my army that I would return soon. It was late by the time I managed to locate your quarters. Most of my men do not know your Aryan language. In these empty plains devoid of greenery and foliage, they are likely to become helpless. It is better that I stay with them. I shall look you up tomorrow." He left, without closing the door behind him. The wind blew in and blew out the lamp. Drona called out to Havyaka.

Ashwatthama didn't eat his meal. He had had a big meal with Duryodhana, consisting of meat, rice, pancakes and sweet porridge. Father and son slept near each other in the room of ritual hearth. Though Drona's head was near the hearth, the rank smell from outside hit his nose. It was mixed up with the stench of his son's sweat. Drona realised that his son had not had a bath the whole day. Drona wondered whether he had taken bath in the last two days. As for the matter of performing the fire ritual, it was even more difficult to imagine him doing it. Then Drona heard his son snore loudly. He reconciled himself to a sleepless night, punctuated by his son's heavy

snoring. Back home, he felt, it was different. It was a large many-storeyed house. He slept on the ground-floor, and his son on the upper floor. Drona said to himself, "But here, there is no choice. I shall have to put up with his snoring. His nature is certainly not that of a Brahmin. But he cannot become a Ksatriya either. He lacks the pride, arrogance and self-confidence of an Aryan ruler. Lacks, too, worldly wisdom. But he has plenty of physical strength. He also possesses mastery over all the skills in weaponry I have taught. In order to elevate him over others in the art and science of fighting, I used to instruct him secretly in several important techniques and methods, not offered to his class-fellows and other students. But this stupid fellow would pass on these lessons to his class-fellows if only they tempted him with food. How can such a fellow become anything?" Drona turned to the other side in his bed.

Late in the night, though his snoring had not abated, Drona did feel sleepy. In that sleepy state, he remembered his father. Father had built for himself a hermitage. Anyone desirous of learning from him, had to go in search of him in his forest hideout. He had the independence of mind to refuse to kowtow before crowned heads. He would choose his students freely without fear of anybody. He would reject anyone as a student if he found him unfit. Where was the master who could dictate to him whom to teach and whom not? His father visited him and troubled him in the dream. Then he woke up. And his son's snoring continued. Soon his ears got used to it and ceased to react to its mechanical rhythm. His mind and consciousness drifted slowly towards the sea of sleep. He had a dream in which he desired to found a new hermitage. The dream faded into genuine sleep. But he woke up early next morning. Outside, it was still dark. The stench of urine, human defecation, and animal droppings had grown worse, making one want to retch. In the dim light Drona could see already people squatting to relieve themselves everywhere. Drona was outraged and angry. But immediately he realised that those people were helpless. Where could they go? He himself wanted to go away somewhere, anywhere. He reflected, "The Pandavas are intelligent. They had managed to reach earlier and chosen the most favourable site for their camping." He went some distance away and finished his defecation. Then he woke up Havyaka, and went inside with water. The sun had risen but not Ashwatthama. He was not the type to rise early. When he went to the back of his tent to take his bath, Havyaka said, "The water vessel is only half full. They haven't yet supplied the water that was supposed to have come yesterday night. After this water is spent, we may run out of water even for washing after defecating."

By the time he had washed his hands and feet, and come inside Ekalavya had arrived. Behind him were two strong servants. They put down on the floor two large jars of honey, two soft pieces of tiger

skin and one bamboo basket full of wild fruits. As he did yesterday, he again prostrated before Drona. After being told to sit down, he squatted on the bare floor. Ashwatthama's snoring could be heard now and then. Drona sat a little away on the other side. The rays of the sun rushing through the open door fell on him. Drona inspected him carefully. The gold crown, dazzling in the sun-light, the gold epaulettes, the necklace and other ornaments, were no longer there. He now wore plain cotton dress, and skin armour plate and skin epaulettes. His servants at the door were clad in the customary dress of the forest tribe. But metal bows were hanging from their shoulders.

Without any preliminaries, Ekalavya went directly to the heart of the matter, "I thought over the matter the whole night. Hoping to take revenge on Arjuna, I came to this war, to join Duryodhana's side. Now I have learnt that it was Bhishma who had inflicted injustice on me. And he is the chief of this side. It is, therefore, logical that if I want to take revenge on Bhishma, I shall have to join Arjuna's side. Yesterday, there was some announcement. What was the manner of birth of the Pandavas?" Drona used the term,Niyoga. Ekalavya resumed, "Well,you people have all sorts of customs, Niyoga and what else. We have nothing of the kind. We don't have the strange belief that if you die without children and your lineage ceases to grow, you acquire sin. We do not possess acquisitions to be passed on to our children such as land, houses and palaces. It is a tri vial issue for us whether Dharma lies with Arjuna or Duryodhana. I had no sleep the whole night, with so many men and the stench of their sweat, and their urine and defecation. Weare not used to such conditions. And this kind of warfare is not our meat. I have decided to go back home with my men."

Drona sat still as if in a trance. He began to detect some new meaning in the words of Ekalavya. As if remembering, Ekalavya continued, "Our forest lies between the Kurus and the Panchalas. The elephants we tame are in demand from both kingdoms. Once I learnt that Arjuna had married a daughter of the Panchalas, I stopped our supply of elephants to the Panchalas. They told me they would increase their price of an elephant by two more cartloads of grain and five more gold coins. But I refused, while I sold it to Hastinavati at a lesser price. Now I see that I made a serious miscalculation. Now I shall sell them to neither. I climbed a tree to survey both sides here. Both have massed up so many elephants. The elephants were said to be bought for the purpose of transporting goods. Now I find that they are using them in the war and will expose them to death. I feel very bad about having sold them. I used to copy your Aryan kings by donning ornaments of gold, and the gold had been exchanged for the elephants. Yesterday night, after deep introspection, I threw away all the Aryan outfit, and resolved to don our traditional dress."

The Guru still didn't say anything. It was difficult to say' whether it was because he had nothing more to say or because he could not think of anything to say. Ekalavya, too, sat still and silent. But Drona continued to stare at him. Ekalavya stood up, passed Ashwatthama and prostrated at the feet of Drona. Then he left. The two servants he had brought followed him. Drona sat immobile like a statue. Ashwatthama's snoring subsided. But his body moved rhythmically from the chest down to the navel as he breathed in sleep. The sight of his son made him angry. He said to himself again that his son was no Brahmin. He wanted to curse him. But soon he realised that he didn't have the strength of mind to do so. At that time, Havyaka asked, "Shall I keep things ready for the fire rite?" Drona did not reply. However, Havyaka got things ready for the rite—a small bundle of twigs, and a vessel full of ghee. Remembering that he had forgotten to bring the tiger skin from the town, he laid down on the floor the two pieces brought by Ekalavya. Then he took inside, honey and the fruits brought by Ekalavya. Drona sat on the Darbha mat, pushed the twigs into the ritual hearth and began to kindle the fire by fanning. After a while they caught fire. As he chanted the sacred formulae and poured the ghee, the aroma of the hearth began to rise. All of a sudden, a wind from the outside wafted the foul smell of the human and animal waste. He closed his nose and started to breathe through the mouth. Even then the stench proved intolerable. Though there was no ritual action, he poured four ladles of ghee. He pushed his face closer to the fire. In the pleasant heat produced by the shooting flames, the ritual words came out of his mouth automatically. But his mind was elsewhere, remembering and digesting the words of Ekalavya. Drona recalled that Ekalavya had said it was meaningless to side the party led by Bhishma as well as the party of Arjuna, and the best thing was to go back to the forest. Drona considered that the best decision. Now Drona began to recite the ritual words consciously as he performed the fire rite. A definite decision crystallised in his mind." I believe that the Pandavas have Dharma on their side. I supported Duryodhana because of the obligation of having eaten his food. But now I see that they who have gobbled up my northern Panchala owe me more than I do them." His decision solidified. The mind became light, and the ritual words came out more clearly and with concentrated attention. He finished the rite. As he was going round the fire ritually, he saw Ashwatthama open his eyes. As he had emptied all the ghee into the hearth, the fire burst into bright flames, stimulating his enthusiasm.

Drona, "Child, get up. I want to tell you something."

Ashwatthama sat up.

"Look here. The Arya Dharma states categorically that the birth of the Pandavas is legitimate. Now we are on the side violating the

Dharma. But let us not go to them. But let us not also stay with these fellows. Let us go somewhere far away from here, and set up a hermitage and live there. What do you say to this?"

Ashwatthama, yawning widely said, "No. I shall not desert Duryodhana."

"What is this relationship you two have between yourselves? Sages and mendicants refused to offer you a bride because you did not maintain the purity of your Brahmin-hood. You failed to win a Ksatriya bride because you were dismissed by them as good-for-nothing fellow eating shamelessly the crumbs in Ksatriya households. Could that Duryodhana get you at least a bride? You are now fifty-five. The Bharadwaja lineage will die with you." His words had grown louder in anger, even reaching outside the hut.

Ashwatthama yawned once again. After he brought his mouth to its normal position, he replied, "Father, your mind has deranged. It seems that Dhrishtadyumna is shouting hoarse that he would not regard himself as a Panchala until he kills Drona who had humiliated his father by having him bound to the cot. He is a brother-in-law of the Pandavas. If you now refuse to fight and run away to build a hermitage, wouldn't people of other countries laugh at you and say that the great leader of archery is a coward? Shouldn't I let the blood of that Dhrishtadyumna flow?"

Drona had no answer. After a brief pause, he said to his son, "Go and wash your face. We have excellent honey and fruits." He made his son rise by shaking his powerful shoulders.

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Chapter

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THE charioteer Sukesha announced, "The hermitage is here. Those round-roofed huts over there. That is the place." Bhishma ordered the horse-men to get down and follow him on foot. He, too, got off the chariot. Though the wobbling and shaking of the chariot had produced pain all over his body, it felt good to walk. Holding his hand, Sukesha walked with the old warrior in the light of the torch. Bhishma said, "Send the torch-bearers to the rear. I can't stand the burning smell." Then he breathed slowly. He was enjoying the aroma of the ritual hearth. The fire in these hermitages was never extinguished, and the aroma of ghee poured on it could be smelled thousand feet away. While enjoying the aroma through ' his nose, Bhishma remembered the sacred words of the fire rite. He asked, "How far now?" Sukesha answered, "Not very far. Not even hundred feet. Over there." He did not believe the charioteer. He stopped to take a deep breath. Even then he could not believe it. It felt like a different kind of smell. He couldn't identify it immediately. Yes, now he felt he could. It was something that could be easily recognised when it was expected but not in any unexpected place. Now what was it? Bhishma was now sure it was the smell of burning a dead human body or the smell of an already burnt human flesh and bones. He told Sukesha, "Sukesha, isn't this stench of a human body — flesh and bones — burning?" It blew from the opposite direction. Sukesha answered, "Yes, grand-father. Somebody may have died in the hermitage. It is the smell of a funeral pyre." Bhishma became worried, and wondered who could have died. Was it Krishna Dvaipayana? Though he inwardly prayed that it shouldn't be Krishna Dvaipayana, his suspicion did not go. He thought, "Though he is younger than me, he is still around one hundred and eight or ten years. And his is a shrunken and shrivelled body. It can go any time." As they got closer to the hermitage, the stench of the dead body intensified. It affected not only Bhishma's nostrils but also his mind. The dim f moonlight, instead of making visible the outline of the huts, made' them look vague and ominous. No cry of birds or insects sliced the solidified silence. No lowing of the cows or bellowing of the buffaloes disturbed the air. It was prohibited to chant Vedic text in an atmosphere reeking with the smell of burning human flesh and

bones. Perhaps the most appropriate sound in this death-filled air would have been the hooting of the owls. But even that sound was not there.

Yet when they reached the hermitage, people were there. Some sixty to eighty Vedic experts. Thirty to forty bachelor Brahmins. With white and black beards and moustaches and matted hair. Some of them, old men, refusing to cover their chests with a blanket even in that cold weather. They were accompanied by three burning torches. When they recognised Bhishma and his party, one torch-bearer ran towards them. With him came Krishna Dvaipayana, a figure with white hair and black chest. His face had the calmness of a corpse. Bhishma spoke, "Krishna, somebody seems to have died in the hermitage. I have chosen an inauspicious moment to visit you. Who died?"

When he answered, "I ", his voice sounded like that of a dead man. His voice, his face, his eyes were ghostly. Bhishma had a clear view of his face. Between the two rose and fell the yellow flames of the torch. The torch was soaked in oil. There was the silent movement of the shadows of those surrounding them like ghosts. Dvaipayana's question, "How did you get the news?" did not make immediate sense to Bhishma. He answered, "Having decided to go, you could have set out early enough to reach here by after-noon. In that case, you would have had a last glimpse of the dying man's face. Had you come before sunset, you could have seen the dead man's face." These words left Bhishma somewhat confused, and he could not fully comprehend their sense. Dvaipayana said to himself, "What does it matter whether you saw his face or not?" He added, "These are not my words, but those of the dead man." Then Dvaipayana became abruptly silent. As the wind became still, the flames flickered less, but the movement of shadows continued. It was at this point that Bhishma began to suspect that the dead person referred to could be Dvaipayana's son Shukadeva. When he turned right to look at one of the inmates of the hermitage, around eighty, with a fair-complexioned face, wearing a black blanket, Bhishma's suspicion became confirmed. This person was saying, "Shukadeva was a great seer and a learned man. He had the gift of willing his own death. He chose to die."

Then Dvaipayana collapsed and sat on the ground. Somebody close by gave support to his back immediately. Squatting opposite to him and clasping his shoulders, in the uncertain light, Bhishma , " tried to console the bereaved father, "Krishna, it is true that I am -older than you. I am also your cousin. And who has the qualification to counsel you who have digested and mastered Vedic wisdom? Has anyone born escaped death? Some go earlier and others later. I myself often feel disgusted with my long life that has forced me to see the worst

things happen. But are we masters of our own death? They said Shukadeva is one who possessed the gift of dying at will. Is that any ordinary achievement? Rise. Let's go to the hermitage."

In the light of the torch, Dvaipayana's face looked deathly grave. His eyes, normally penetrating in looks, now appeared dry and lifeless. As Bhishma and two of his disciples supported him and helped him walk to the hermitage, the eighty-year old, red-complexioned disciple compelled his Guru to eat, "You must eat this corn flour mixed in milk. Wasn't his death willed the very day he started fasting? Today only his body crumbled. How can a wise person, a sage and a seer like you become so sorrow- stricken and refuse food? How can you finish your life's mission?"

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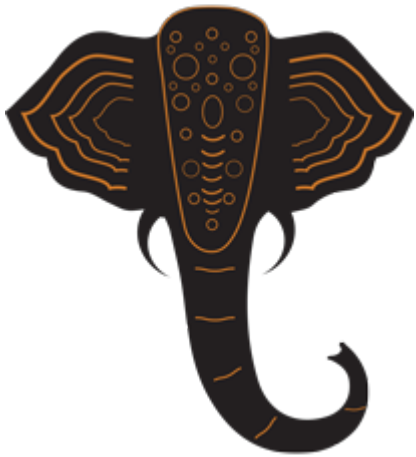
PART TWELVE



Chapter

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THE entire hermitage was engulfed in darkness. The stench of the burning flesh was affecting all the five senses. As if it was polluting the air both spiritually and physically. Bhishma felt as if he had entered the inside of the belly of death itself. Of course, he was personally not scared of death, being granted the gift of self-chosen death. Not that he had not encountered death in the long innings of his life. He remembered how many younger persons he had seen die in his own family. He had to take up the responsibilities of running the government of the kingdom as well as the Kuru household because of those early deaths! Yet, these earlier encounters with death had never produced such an acute sense of the presence of death. Bhishma smelled the smoke of death rise from the nerves of his navel as he listened to the great sage who was now called upon to host him. Not of his own death. No, what he saw and experienced was the shadow of death pervading and preparing all things — the earth on which he had been living, the water he had been drinking, the grain he had eaten, and the sky, sun, moon, stars, trees and plants his eyes had consumed. He could also see the meaning of what the hermitage was doing. Krishna Dvaipayana had four chief disciples. One of them introduced the others, "You see that eighty-year old red faced, black-blanket wearing person, who remains in the Guru's hut, so that the sorrowing Guru is not left alone, that is Paila. The one who brought corn flour mixed with milk is Vaishampayana. The one who brought the lamp here is Jaimini. I am Sumantu. The Guru has instructed each of us in one particular Veda. Instruction means regular lessons." Bhishma intervened, "What do you mean one each? Isn't the Veda one thing?" Bhishma recalled that as a youth, some ninety years ago, he was studying the Vedas, and the question arose out of that memory. Yet, there was a deeper, inner source for this query. In fact, the question had been forced from the pressures of the present, in particular the mystery and reality of death. And hence he continued the debate, "On what basis did they divide the Vedas into four units? After dividing it into four, why was that each one of you was taught only one unit? How is it that every one of you was not taught all the four units?" Sumanta explained, "It is not because one disciple cannot be taught more than one. The Guru never said that he

wouldn't teach the other Vedas. But the main question is: who has the ability and strength to digest more than one, or even one? You know our Guru well. When he was eight, his father Parashara took him away from his mother and started him on the life-long study of the Vedas. He was born with an acute intelligence. And he had a phenomenal memory-power. God knows how many lands he visited in his father's company! Even after his father's death, he continued his ceaseless wandering, visiting different lands, and discovering different traditions of Vedic learning. You know all this. In different countries, they employ different sacred texts in performing rites. Even the intonations differ. They have different exegesis on the meaning as well as the fruit is of these rites. There were, have been, and continue to be, endless wrangles over what is the theory and right practice. Additionally, over thousands of years perhaps, there have been evolved different traditions by different sages and seers. And each

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Then Bhishma remembered: "This Krishna was thirteen when he came to Hastinavati with his father to see his mother. But even at that early age, he had memorised most of the Vedas. When it was decided that he was the best man to perform Niyoga on Ambika and Ambalika, who had been widowed without children he was some twenty-eight or thirty years old. As soon as he woke up, he had nothing else to do but recite and memorise the Vedas. He learnt from the Brahmins of Hastinavati their ritual texts. He also learnt from me whatever ritual texts I knew. Later, he remained unmarried. But it seems that in order to leave behind a successor to his learning and scholarly tradition, he got as a gift the womb of a woman from the apsara tribe, planted his seed in it, and got a son. It is said that his son far outshone his father in keenness of intellect and Vedic scholarship. I am not sure if I have seen him. Maybe, No, he had

never come to Hastinavati. Maybe he did come, but I missed him. Why did he die taking the vow of fasting unto death? I must ask Sumanta..."Yet Bhishma had a sort of fear about asking Sumanta. Yes, once again, his mind was filled with the smell of death. That made him feel disgusted with himself. Yet, he could not overcome his curiosity and asked about the reason for Dvaipayana's son choosing to die. The oil- lamp was casting its weak light. It appeared as if its light was fighting a losing battle with the surrounding darkness. Opposite to him was dimly visible Sumanta's white beard, wrinkled forehead, sunken eyes. It seemed as if his facial features had a natural inclination to fade into the surrounding darkness.

Sumanta answered, "Shukadeva was a greater genius than his father. But he was also his father's disciple. Like his father he had amassed a wealth of knowledge through his wanderings in several countries. Not just Vedic scholarship. But he also picked up with diligence ideas and thought opposed to the Vedas in some places. And that was the cause of his undoing. Is it possible for a faithless person without commitment to be happy?"

Bhishma, "Of course not. How can it give happiness? But how did he lose faith?"

Sumanta, "In a way, it is difficult to characterise his case as one of loss of faith. In the beginning, he started arguing and maintaining that of the three stages of life — Brahmacãrya or celibacy, Garhastya or householder status and Vanaprastha or retreating into the forest stage — the highest was the first stage of Brahmacãrya. Now this is a position that cannot be easily or wholly rejected?"

Bhishma was inwardly happy that there was this son of a great sage who upheld the supremacy of the life-stage that he had himself accepted as the only stage of his life. He concurred, "Yes, how can one?"

"Garhastya means attachments." Sumanta said, "The householder develops attachments like wife and children, and they grow stronger as time passes and they tie him up into knots. It is an illusion that, in old age, one can succeed in disentangling oneself from them. Hence, it is best to avoid the problem by nipping it in the bud itself. Hence, Shukadeva advocated the position that one should not move out of the Brahmacãrya stage."

Bhishma nodded his head admiringly, "Yes, yes."

Sumanta, "He had defeated learned men in some places by arguing on these lines. Virtually none could match him in debating skill, polemical force and logical ability. Nobody could beat him in a debate. As you are aware, the court of Videha is celebrated for its philosophical and metaphysical debates and discourses. He was

triumphant there also. They tested very rigorously the substance of his words. They sent to look after him ravishing courtesans, most skilled in the art of love-making, and whom no man could resist. As you know, the sages are not forbidden to have sexual intercourse with women. They had kept as a secret the fact that these courtesans were experts. Under the pretext of attending to him, they touched him and tempted him with every trick of their trade. But Shukadeva remained unmoved not only physically but mentally as well. They had kept strict watch over him, to detect any lapses of behaviour. They found no gesture, not even the movement of his eyes to suggest that he had succumbed to the courtesans physically or mentally."

Bhishma asked for clarification, "Was he impotent from birth?"

Sumantu, "Most certainly not. His every gesture, every movement of his face, everything about him, was bursting with masculinity. He was equally masculine in controlling his masculinity." These words reminded him of himself, and made him see a similar soul. Bhishma had not seen Shuka. He thought, "In my youth, why even now, who can say that I am not a lion in my masculinity? And with what amazing control over my masculinity have I lived. What ravishingly beautiful brides did I win for Vichitraveerya. When the chronically sick husband died, my step-mother Satyavati entreated me several times that I should perform Niyoga on them. Did I deviate even fractionally from my vow of Brahmacãrya? No wonder, the whole Aryavarta equates Bhishma with Brahmacãrya and Brahmacãrya with Bhishma." Bhishma's respect for Shuka enhanced.

Sumantu continued, "Shukadeva accepted Brahmacãrya first intellectually and then grounded it in emotional commitment. But he who used to preach that attachment is evil and believed in living without entanglements of family life, began one fine morning, to advocate the next extreme step. His logic led him to the question: What is the point of living long if family, children and grand-children are meaningless burdens? What does it matter if one is alive or dead? Why not die this moment? Why die fifty years hence? The goal of life is liberation from the poisonous wheel of life and death. There is no real liberation without renunciation of the world of desire and selfness. But, logically, i f that is renounced, one has no rationale for living. Only those afraid of death may have to live. But then those fearing death are persons who have not given up their entanglement with the worldly self. He began to propagate and defend such a doctrine. How can he be defeated? Who can defeat him? He was living in this very hermitage. He used to drag us into debates. At last one day he resolved to practise his own doctrine. And he started on a fast unto death. We begged him not to. His own father, his progenitor, was filled with tears in his eyes. Our Guru does not weep for any reason. He asked his father, 'Father, when what I am embarking on is

not wrong, your weeping has no meaning. Of what use has been your mastery over the Vedas?'

If one gives up food and water, how long can the body last. And this after-noon..."Before Sumantu completed his statement, Bhishma felt the smell of death assailing his nose. But in a different way he became aware that it was not that. When he entered the hermitage, Bhishma's mind had been filled with the presence of death densely, but the discussion on other things had made him forget it a little. Now again the sense of death had become so thick that there was no skylight through which it could escape. As there was nothing else in front of him, his eyes simply stared mechanically at Sumantu's face. His face also appeared to be a mirrored image of death. The weak light that was struggling for life every moment seemed to be establishing at last darkness as the supreme truth. After a while, Sumantu asked, "We have been discussing but only this matter and nothing else. Ever since his son started his fast, the Guru has shut himself off from the outside world. It seems there is a war going on between your grandchildren divided into two parties. What made you visit us here? Were you fed up with things there?"

Engulfed in this atmosphere of death, Bhishma had completely forgotten the very purpose of visit to the hermitage. Though he remembered it now, he found it inconsequential. He had no longer any enthusiasm about that matter. Sumantu did not press him any further for an answer. He kept silent. Silence pervaded everywhere. It was a silence that seemed to emerge out of the womb of darkness. Realising that the only way to escape from it was through words, Bhishma suddenly explained the problem which had prompted him to arrive here to the hermitage from the battle- field, "I have to leave here by tomorrow afternoon. It is not possible to broach this matter with Krishna in the state he is in. Having come, let me at least tell you about it. You are yourself an expert in the Vedas. I am myself undergoing a kind of change. But I confess that I am not sure what that change is."

By the time he finished his words, it was some three hours past mid-night. But Sumantu was unable to give any decisive advice on the Dharmic validity or otherwise of Niyoga. Sumantu could only say, "It seems that on this issue also we need to do what our Guru has done with the Vedas: to collect different theories and practices, collate them and arrive at a balanced position. But till then..."He was unable to go further. Hence he fell silent. Silence engulfed everything once again. Excepting for the small area illuminated by the feeble lamp, there was nothing but a sea of darkness.

Sumantu said, "You must be tired after the journey. It is also very late in the night. Please, go to sleep now. We shall talk about it in the

morning. If we place the matter before the Guru, it may help him get out of the shell of sorrow. It may prove to be mutually beneficial." Then he stood up. Half- opening the door of the hut, he said, "Though we are in the thick of a forest, there is no fear of wild animals here. After all, this is a hermitage, and therefore there can be no question of any fear of robbers." Then he closed the door, and disappeared in the darkness.

Bhishma found himself all alone. It was a small lamp. Its oil was very nearly spent. The darkness wound round one and choked one's breath. The back and sides of his body had now begun to ache due to the journey. But the straw-filled mattress proved to be very soft. The pillow filled with the husk of paddy also felt comforting. Covering himself with a warm woollen blanket, Bhishma went to sleep. He was a little peeved that they had supplied him a black blanket, not a white one. He tried to console himself with the idea that it didn't matter what the colour of the blanket was, but he didn't succeed. Again he chided himself for worrying about the colour as if the black blanket would make him dark. It didn't work. A vague sense of worry troubled him. He didn't understand it. Then he felt like kicking away the blanket, but it was quite cold. The whistling of the wind outside seemed to him to be a symbol of the captured darkness. His mind went on telling him that Shuka did not die for nothing. But that also meant a desire to discover the cause of his dying. Bhishma thought, "He, too, was a life-long-celebrate like me. But he had held with impeccable logic that only a householder has real reason to live. Why? Because a householder can desire to play with his children and grand-children, nourish them, nurture them and advise them. Yes, if celibacy is the highest state, then why live at all? Or how long can one live?" On the issue of Brahmacãrya, he was one with Shuka. But then Bhishma was unable to see the next step. He couldn't go along with Shuka on that path of logically consistent self-extinction. He said to himself, "I became a celibate in order to allow my father to satisfy his sexual urge. Certainly not because I had considered Brahmacãrya superior to householder-ship. Her father had said to me that he would give his daughter in marriage to a household in which I would not exercise any authority, but retire to a hermitage across the Ganga on the other bank. Then I rejoined the household when she herself wanted me to help them out. But then I left the palace as soon as I had accomplished the task. Why didn't I realise at the right time that the last stage of my work had been completed? Instead, I let myself be linked to attachments one after another." The lamp appeared to be on the point of extinction. Though he felt like pouring the oil into it from the mug nearby, he didn't do so thinking it was not necessary to have light when sleeping. Yet the smell of the burnt out wick, a smoky smell, filled his nostrils. It was the same as the black smell of death. The sense of blackness and death was sharpened by the colour

of the blanket covering him. He reminded himself that he was sleeping all alone in the hut. He had no idea of the number of huts in the hermitage and their location. It was too dark to know this. He asked himself, "Is this hut where I am sleeping too isolated from the complex of huts?" Bhishma felt a sense of fear. He remembered, "Didn't father live all by himself in that huge mansion in Hastinavati for so many years? The only company he had were a servant or two huddled in some corner or the other. This Bhishma has for no reason been in the grip of fear today in this darkness..."After a short while, he regained his courage. That did not nullify the pervasive smell of death. Bhishma was consumed with the desire to track down the origin of the smell. But he asked himself, "What does it mean to talk about the source of the smell?" He had no answer to offer. After a while, he began to doze off. With sleep came an imaginary picture of Shuka. Bhishma thought to himself, "How was Shuka? He had a father who is dark-complexioned and cadaverous. But the womb that gave birth to him was that of a ravishing apsara. But how did she look?" But the imagined picture failed to satisfy his sense of curiosity. He wished he had come a day earlier so that he could have had a glimpse of the dying person. He could have met him and chatted with him. He thought, what useful purpose would it have served to meet a person on the way to his death? He felt that he should have seen him prior to his beginning the fast or at least . on the day he had begun his fast. By that time his eyes had travelled far into the land of sleep. He hoped to meet Shuka in his dream. But he was afraid that if he did meet him in the dream he might scream terror-stricken. But slowly his wakefulness was drowned in sleep.

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Chapter 51

AFTER the disciples forcibly fed him with corn flour mixed with milk and jaggery, Dvaipayana's body gained a little life and strength. Then they laid him down on a deer-skin, spread on a mattress made of elephant grass. After that they covered him with a warm blanket and put his head on a pillow. Near him sat silent his three disciples — Paila, Vaisampayana and Jaimini. A lamp mounted on a pillar was burning nearby. There was nothing new for them to talk about Shuka's death. Nobody found it necessary to repeat the same old matter to feed the mind. Though the actual time of death was that after-noon, the decision to die was taken several months back. Why so many months. They did not know whether the interval between the decision and the deed was because of the process of strengthening the decision or because of preparing the mind to be strong enough or whether the desire to live controlled his life-views. Dvaipayana asked, "Where is Sumantu?"

Jaimini, "He is busy looking after our guest, Bhishma."

Dvaipayana, "You can all go and sleep."

Jaimini, "Leaving you alone?"

The Guru did not answer. After a pause, he said, "I was prepared for the eventuality the day he started his fast. Nothing new has arisen today. You may go now." But the disciple did not rise to go. The Guru closed his eyes. But sleep didn't come. The three disciples realised that the Guru wanted to be left alone. Paila signalled with his eye that they should leave. Then they left one by one noiselessly. Jaimini, the last to leave, closed the doors without making any noise. Dvaipayana alone opened his eyes. The lamp on the pedestal was burning steadily excepting for the space below the pedestal which was dark, the rest of the room and the walls were visible dimly. Dvaipayana was staring at it. His mind was a vacuum. There was no serious pain or anguish, no flooding sorrow. Only total renunciation and withdrawal. Complete indifference to the heat of sorrow. Dispassionate disconnection from pleasure. The Guru thought that his son, Shuka, had perhaps reached this stage long time ago! As he was watching the burning wick and the darkness at its feet and

turned to his right, suddenly he felt that the weight of personal sorrow had been lifted off his chest. He asked himself, "Why don't I feel the sorrow now? Why didn't I weep freely? Why didn't I, unable to endure the sorrow, run away to drown in a river? Why didn't I climb a tall mountain and jump from it?" His body was covered over with big logs of dry wood, and the fire lit shot into dancing flames. He asked himself again, "Why didn't it occur to me to reach that stage my son had reached? Not even momentarily? Or was what Shuka did a fruit of deeds growing out of his character and qualities as father?" Such thoughts and questions filled him with sorrow and wonder. He remembered his great grand-father Vasistha whose sons had been killed in a battle by king Kaushika. Unable to bear the sorrow, Vasistha tied himself with a rope and jumped into a river. The boat-men swam to him, cut the rope and saved him. But the sage vented his wrath on them and abused them passionately. He tried to jump from a high boulder, but couldn't die. Then he decided to make a heap of logs, lit it and burn his body. Dvaipayana was puzzled that he didn't suffer a fraction of sorrow felt by his great grand-father. As if from a distance and with the eyes of a disinterested spectator, he compared his life with that of his great grand-father. He reflected on the comparison, "The great grand-father lived the life of a house-holder. It seems he was passionately attached to his wife. Though his wife Arundhati was an out-caste woman, he accepted her without reservation and had children by her. She was an exemplary woman of the household and treated her husband's disciples in the hermitage as her own children. That was perhaps the reason why he loved his children with such intensity. When the children died, he wandered like a mad man in inconsolable sorrow. Reputed as an exemplary sage and seer, a master of Vedic text and rites, how could he drown himself in such sorrow at the loss of sons? Can a person of such qualities find himself carried away by sorrow at the loss of his children? What is the point of mastering and digesting the wisdom of the Vedas as part of his very being if one cannot stay still like a formidable rock which no amount of rain can either soak or splinter? Or does the life of a house-holder generate inevitably such attachments, weaknesses and bondages? I didn't choose to become a house-holder. I remained a Brahmacãri. Does that explain the difference between us?" His eyes closed out of exhaustion. As the external light was shut out, his inner memory blossomed." Perhaps Vasistha's sons, too, must have been attached deeply to their father. And they had a mother overflowing with love. He, too, was an equally affectionate soul. No wonder the children were so deeply attached to Kim. What about me? I was eight when father took me away from my mother. Even to this day I cannot recall distinctly the details. There was a river perennially full of water. It was the eastern bank or was it the southern bank? I don't remember. It was a house on a mound. I can smell fish, a heap of dry fish. Small ones. She had

black and thick hands. She would take me in her boat to cross the river, and on the way cast her net to catch fish. Sometimes she caught a handful and sometimes she had to go empty-handed. She used her hands to make a living out of fish. Then I remember the sun's heat, the sweat-soaked neck. That's about all I have left with me of my boyhood. After that all memory becomes crystallised around the Vedic texts. And commentaries and different readings. And different versions followed in different countries. Then I remember mother's weeping face as I crossed the river, holding father's hand. I recall nobody was ready to ferry the boat across the river. Mother must have kept indoors crying. So father himself had to row the boat. Then studies and studies, wanderings, and wanderings. Then discourse. At twenty, father let me demonstrate my Vedic learning, my correct intonation, in an assembly of Vedic experts. I remember the learned assembly nodding in appreciation. Besides these items, my memory is of nothing but Vedic texts, ritual formulae. Their endless semantic ' implications. Well, this Krishna's life is nothing but one seamless web of memorising and reciting of Vedic lore. My life was dedicated to the collection of Vedic texts, their different versions. My collection exceeds by far anything got together by earlier sages.

Yet many must have been lost to us. Had I not undertaken this task, so many texts would have been lost forever. How I wandered in search of those Vedic fragments! How many Vedic scholars, schools and groups did I meet and pester for their knowledge and texts! And what effort I had to put in to make them reveal their secrets and yield their texts! And what miserliness they showed in refusing to part with their knowledge!"Sleep had made some inroads into his waking. But, Shuka's memory came back, "Did that boy misunderstand the meaning of the Vedas? I failed to convince him with reason and evidence that he was wrong in his interpretation of the Vedas. If he had chosen to debate on a specific text or a group of texts, and their meaning, I could have won him over. But his method was of a different order, of a different frame-work. He asked questions not within the frame of the Vedas but about the framework itself, questioning its very foundations. And what questions! What is the goal of the Veda? Is it attainment of entry into heaven? Liberation? But what does it mean to say that one enters the heaven? What is liberation? What does it mean to detach oneself? Why does one need the evidence of the Vedas to settle such questions? Well, I found to my disbelief that there was no way I could defeat him in the debate over such questions. Yet, somewhere deep down my inner self, I was convinced that he had taken the wrong route. Now I can see that I had no method or technique capable of meeting the arguments he raised." Then sleep came once again and engulfed him. He went into a deep slumber, his head on the pillow and his limbs stretched.

After a considerable time, he woke up. He asked himself: How long did I sleep? The three disciples were still waiting at the door outside. It was chilly. They were whispering, "He is perhaps sleeping now." Whose was that voice? Krishna wondered whether it was Paila's or Jaimini's. It gratified him to know that his disciples were waiting on him, foregoing sleep in that bitter cold. He asked: Can there be better children than disciples? Then he was fully awake. The lamp had blown out. He welcomed the darkness. It seemed so peaceful. It offered one's inner mind full freedom. Then he heard a voice speak outside, "Duryodhana had decided to exclude the Pandavas from the Guru lineage because they were born through Niyoga. Bhishma has come to consult the Guru on this is ue before making up his own mind." Yes, it was Sumantu's voice, thought Krishna. Another voice in whisper, "Please, talk in a low voice. The Guru may be half- a sleep." Then Sumantu, his voice recognisable though in whisper, "Bhishma has assumed supreme command of Duryodhana's armies. He has come here after announcing the option through a drummer for the participants to stay with Duryodhana if they accepted his position that the Niyoga-born Pandavas do not belong to the Kuru lineage, and those who rejected this position, can go to the Pandava side."

Another whispered, "Let's not discuss it here. We shall go to the ritual chamber." Then Dvaipayana heard steps moving away. His sleep had totally disappeared now. He once again repeated the question to himself, "How long did I sleep?" He opened his eyes. The darkness was so thick that it made little difference whether one closed or opened one's eyes. Of course, the only difference was that the eye-lids shifted their position. He realised that it was always like that to live in a hut. He closed his eyes again. He thought that his son's body would have been by now burnt to blackness. The fire must have been turned to ash. He wondered: How much time would it take for the burning of a body starved of food and water, emaciated to the point of being skeletal? When he was suffering acutely due to lack of food and water, and was groaning in agony, he refused the offer of milk by his disciples and even when his own father offered it. What fierce determination and strength of will! Dvaipayana said to himself, "Well, now that his body has been burnt to ashes, of what use is that splendid strength of will and determination? And what did he achieve by it?" Then he felt an urge to go out and see the cremation spot. Slowly he sat up. He searched for his stick and found it. Covering his shoulders with the blanket, he went to the door with slow steps. When he looked out, it appeared as if death had solidified into darkness outside. It was pitch dark. Since he knew that his disciples were discussing the issue of Dharma in the ritual chamber, he went behind the hut. He knew the location of every structure in the hermitage so well that even in darkness he could reach them — all the residential huts, the cowshed near-by and the kitchen and the

store towards the north. But that day he found everything disoriented. He tried to locate the cremation spot. He asked himself, "Wasn't it towards the south, beyond the cluster of trees, on the bank of the stream that he was placed on the funeral pyre of dry logs? But how can I say 'he' was cremated when only his body bereft of soul was cremated?" Suddenly his head was whirling. He asked, "Why was the soul so eager to desert the body? Where has that soul now gone? Who has seen it?" Memory of hundreds of ritual texts flooded his mind. Pausing for a while, leaning on his crutch, he moved forward. As he was trying to find his way with the staff, he remembered Bhishma. And it led him to reflection, "It seems he has come here now to consult me on the question of whether Niyoga was sanctioned by Dharma or it was a violation of Dharma. His brother, what is his name? Vichitraveerya died without children. This meant the end of the Kuru lineage. But Bhishma had taken the vow of celibacy for life. Convinced that the path of Dharma demanded the continuation of the lineage through Niyoga, it was Bhishma who, on the advice of his mother, invited me to perform the Niyoga. Why did this Kuru grandfather who was then fully convinced that Niyoga was Dharma now entertain doubts about the Dharmic validity of the Niyoga performed on his younger brother's daughters-in-law, that too, with the husband's consent? If he had no doubts about it, then, why did he travel all this way to consult me? At that time I merely heard the word, Niyoga. I had no idea of its real meaning. Anyway it is a Ksatriya practice and custom. It suited the Ksatriyas who were anxious that kingdoms they had taken pains to build up should remain within their own lineage till the end of time. How could I, donning matted hair, whose only worldly wealth consisted in the deer-skin mat and the vessel to carry ritual water, grasp its full meaning? She told me, 'Child, you are technically an elder brother to my son, Vichitraveerya. Also you are a Vedic Brahmin. Please perform Niyoga on both my daughters-in-law. See that you treat both equally and that neither of them levels against me any accusation of partiality.' Didn't I agree because I couldn't say no to a mother whom I had met after so many years? Wasn't it this Bhishma who instructed me in the rules and procedure of Niyoga? He had said, 'The time must be mid-night. The man and the woman involved should apply ghee to their whole body. The ghee should drip from their hair on the head. The idea is that they should appear repulsive to each other. The male must control his senses fully and his attitude towards the woman must be that of a father. The attitude of the woman should be that of a daughter-in-law towards a father-in-law. There should be minimal exchange of words and also as little body contact between the two as possible under the circumstances. Indeed, the approach as a whole should be clinical, unemotional and severely utilitarian. They should avoid looking at each other, Bhishma had said, not exactly using the same words but meaning the same content.

Dvaipayana remembered, Bhishma had said/You are a sage. I regard you as a younger brother in relationship. If you act according to this procedure, you will not have compromised your Brahmacãrya. I, too, am like you, a person who has taken the vow of Brahmacãrya. If you lose your Brahmacãrya, I shall be as unhappy as you. Remember, after the completion of the Niyoga, you should have no feeling of pleasure or gratification. If, by chance, some emotion remains, it must be one of revulsion. Of course, it is best not to have any emotional after-effect. And it will also be a test of the strength of your Brahmacãrya.' That was eighty years ago. Yes, this very Bhishma spoke those words or words to that effect then. -On the first night, I had to do it with Ambike. Was she sitting or lying down? When I entered the bed-room, I didn't know what to do. She had seen that after-noon my matted hair and found me disgusting. I found that she had not applied ghee to her body and hair. She was huddled in a corner. I was not supposed to speak. I was not supposed to rouse any of my sense organs. After standing silently in that darkness, I went to the door and in the dim light wore the clothes kept near it. My mother asked me enthusiastically, "Child, was it fruitful? Why do you stand, looking motionless? Do you know, if there is no fruit and the lineage comes to an end, I shall be committing a terrible sin? I dreamed that the life of a queen would be heavenly. Now I look back with regret at the joyous life I led as a fisher-woman, rowing the boat and catching fish. You must use every bit of your spiritual strength attained through penance to see that this lineage is perpetuated, and thus re-pay the debt you owe your mother!"She wept as she uttered these words." All this business of smearing ghee on the body and hair, and of controlling the sense organs and the attitude of a father — who created all these rules of Dharma, Bhishma? Then, was Bhishma right? Yes, the fires are still burning. Though covered with ash, I can see the embers beneath. The heat too is there as I can feel it t " when I go near the pyre. Turning to blackness and then ashes. If the end is the burning to ash, it matters little whether you die now or fifty years later. Then was Shuka right, after all?" He stood stock-still. Whenever the breeze blew, the ash-covered embers became kindled. Here and there, there were weak flames flickering. He asked himself, "Do the bones take so long to burn?" Then he poked the fire with his staff in the middle portion. He couldn't make out anything. He felt too warm because of the blanket and the heat exuded by his son's burning body. He loosened the blanket so that the breeze could touch his chest, and sat down. There was absolute silence. In that silence which lodged like a mound of ash, his mind appeared to be buried somewhere. After a while, the mind started to work. Yes, Krishna agreed that the first step was ~ to stabilise and control the mind. He said to himself, "Yes, that was what he used to say. In reality, what is the point where my path forks from his. Once again his mind wandered away, but soon alighted on the memory of Bhishma." What

was I thinking about? Yes, it was about the Niyoga. Does each country follow its own unique custom? It seems that my great grand-father Vasishta had performed Niyoga on king Kalmashapada's wife. With his own hands, the king decorated his wife in colourful clothes, dazzling ornaments, fragrant flowers, herbal and animal scents, necklace made of precious stones, and set her on a feather-soft bed. Then he beautified the sage Vasistha with dazzling white garb, combed neatly his long hair, smeared his body with sandal paste, covered his neck with garlands of many flowers, colourful and sweet-scented, took him personally into the bed-room, made him sit by his wife on the bed, joining his palms in reverence, entreated the sage, 'Brahma, with your semen's power produce in my soil a son with extraordinary brightness, and help me.' Then he left the room, and bolted the door from outside. This went on every night till the signs were unmistakable that she had conceived. Then the couple gratefully hosted him a banquet, and sent him away with gifts of a hundred white cows, clothes, and blankets. The sage was sent off ceremonially in a chariot, with the king accompanying him personally till the borders of his kingdom. Later a handsome and shining child was born. But who made these rules about the ghee-smearing and controlling of the senses?" His memory flowed backwards. How far back? Eighty years or a little longer? Maybe a few years this way or that." Yes, the distortion of the custom was Bhishma's handiwork. A servant-maid told me. The elder daughter-in-law Ambike's revulsion against him came to the notice of his mother." Krishna recalled, "Well, my mother then shook her ghee-soaked long hair and took her to task. Even then she was too stubborn, to come to me. Instead, she sent in that night her servant-maid. Then she left, without showing me her face or allowing me to acquaint with her voice. Since conversation was prohibited, I had no way of knowing whether it was the mistress } or her servant-maid. Whatever the cause — obstinacy or anger — -her sending the maid was what really enabled the Niyoga to be performed. How should I know how one should behave with a woman? And that, too, when the woman is made ugly with ghee and I was supposed to show a fatherly attitude? She whispered, 'Sage, I salute you, revered one. Do you find this sticky ghee welcome to your mind?'

I answered, 'Do not speak. It is forbidden by Dharma.'

'Who told you that?'

'Bhishma.'

'What does Brahmacãri Bhishma know about the union and mating between a man and a woman? If, as he says, you constrain your sense organs and immobilise them, how can there be transfer of semen? Revered one, if you promise me that you will not get angry, I

have a few things to tell you.'

T am the one who is determined to conquer anger and suffering.' I whose hand was sticky with ghee did not then realise that she had not applied the ghee to her hand.

'It is wrong to believe that everybody knows everything. I am sure you, too, have no idea about the mating of man and woman. That is obvious from the very fact that you have swallowed the story about dripping ghee and banning of exchange of words. I am a servant-maid of Ambike. Your repulsive appearance made her flee from you, and also her younger sister, Ambalike. But both of them are equally ignorant of the sexual act. They have, of course, no experience of it. Tell me, how can these beautiful, well-built, founded girls whom Bhishma brought with such heroism and gave them to the chronically sick Vichitraveerya, how can they have any taste of what it is to unite sexually with a man? Therefore, they have an almost natural antipathy to sex. And moreover, your dirty matted hair, your scraggy beard and moustache, and your skin made leathery by exposure to rain, cold and sun, well, they had earlier seen all this from a hiding place. Their minds were full of revulsion against you. Do you think Niyoga is a simple affair of impregnating the womb in the mid-night? It takes several days to achieve the successful sowing of the seed of semen in the soil of the womb. You were thoroughly ignorant in the matter. So, now listen to me and follow me. I shall instruct you in all the details. I shall also prepare the minds of mistresses for the act. Forget about Bhishma's injunctions. The elder mistress knows that you cannot raise a crop in a hurry. You must be prepared to stay here for a few days'..."

As he gazed silently the fire that was burning the body of Shuka, his own bud, Dvaipayana remembered very clearly how the servant-maid had kindled his procreative powers. She took a large piece of cloth to rub off the oiliness on the skin due to the ghee. She herself pasted sandal on her body." She touched my body everywhere, as my nerves tingled. In the darkness, she directed me to do this and that. She proved how false was Bhishma's rule of Dharma. The following morning, in day-light, she shampooed my hair with a herb, washed it, dried it and combed it neatly. Then she massaged my body with caraway oil, and made the skin shine softly. In short she transformed me into a person more presentable to her mistresses. They endured me but like a patient tolerating the bitterness of a medicine. Or suffered me like helpless women enduring beastly assaults on their bodies. But the servant-maid seemed to love me. Or was it love or just devotion and reverence? Anyway I thought there was spontaneous joy on her face. With them I felt that they were suffering me like they were patients and I, some medicine, but with that maid I felt like an expert cook showing great joy at the skill displayed by her masterly

cooking! She said, ‘Sage, shall I tell you about one great desire I have? I am a servant-maid. I am meant for the pleasure of the king. Had the king been alive, I would have borne him children, who would belong to the Süta community. Even now I am only a servant-maid in the palace. You were not invited to sleep with me. The seed that you have sown in my womb would grow into the son of a servant-maid. That means he will be a Süta. But your seed I have received for my own pleasure and profit. Will you please tell your mother that once the early rearing by the mother is over, you will take the child away to be educated and brought up by you? Revered one, I do not want my child to turn out to be a Süta. And especially, the child from your seed. If he turns out to be a Brahmin, I shall consider myself purified. I do not mind if he becomes a Ksatriya. A child born of a Brahmin seed even in the womb of a person of my low status, even of a lower one than mine, can become a Brahmin. For instance, you, though born of your mother, became a Brahmin, didn’t you? These Ksatriyas sow their seeds where they will, but refuse to admit the off-spring into their fold.’

"Why didn’t her prayer move me?..."In the still pervading smell of the burning body, he cast his eyes back to eighty years ago, to find out why he didn’t heed her words. But the past appeared to be very dim and indistinct. Even he was not sure that they were her exact words. But that was its content as far as he could make out. But even at this age of one hundred and eight years, he remembered every line of the entire Vedic texts with their variations. His memory failed when it came to details relating to his own life. He wondered, laughing within himself, "Why did I not heed her request? At that time I felt no need for a son and had no desire to acquire one. Why should a sage and seer seeking vedic texts across the countries have a son to entangle his legs? Of course, if I had acceded to her request then, Vidura would have become my son. Even now one can see that Vidura’s nose, forehead, eyes, and the pouch below the eyes, are strikingly like mine. His nature, too. He is different physically and psychologically from the progeny of Dhritarashtra and Pandu, who have descended from Vichitraveerya. What could be the reason for it?..."He toyed with explanations but found none of them satisfactory. Even as he was searching for a better explanation, his mind jumped off to another theme." Great grand-father Vasishta married the untouchable girl Arundhati. But why didn’t I marry that servant-maid in the same way? What was her name? She referred to herself as just a servant-maid. And I also exchanged very few words with her. There was no occasion for me to ask her about her real name. Or may be it never occurred to me to know her name. I cannot even recall clearly her face. I cannot describe her face, her shape, her colour, her body. Vidura is a householder now, with several children, grand- children and great grand-children. How long ago was it when

I visited Hastinavati? Dhritarashtra bows to me respectfully, with the dignity with which a ruler occupying the throne should treat one who has mastered the Vedic knowledge.

But when Vidura held my feet with both his hands, there was a warmth of feeling. I had not till now realised the difference between the two treatments given to me." He remembered that Vidura was fit to be a Brahmin, and had acquired great learning. He remembered clearly Vidura's face." Yes, I remember his face distinctly. I have seen him several times. Whenever I visit Hastinavati he makes it a point to question me with respect and fear on some ticklish issue of Dharma. But I can't remember his mother. Even when I look at Vidura. I couldn't understand why. Was it the result of mental control ? Or what else?..."He didn't wan t to worry about the matter. But without his knowing it, his inner self was filled with dejection. I must ask him, he thought, 'Vidura, what is your mother's name?' But he was afraid of opening his mouth to ask this question. He wondered why it was so. He found no answer. Feeling the chill a little, he drew the blanket closer to his body.

He couldn't know what the time was. He heard the cry of a lonely bird. Again the same thought began to come back. Was it thought or memory? When one tried to separate the two, one found that they were so inter-linked that they couldn't be separated. He asked himself, "When I didn't desire a son then, why did I do so later? Some twenty or twenty-two years later when I myself was fifty years old that I hankered after a son. I wanted a successor to my learning and scholarship. The desire so far I didn't have then arose in me reaching the sky and acquiring a size which no eye could encompass. Deep down within me the fear of mortality and perishability. I entreated that apsara from the Himalaya, 'Beautiful one, I want a son. Can you let me use your womb for nine months? And you must take care of him till he becomes independent of his mother's milk.' It seems in their tribe the children belong to the mother by right of custom. Maybe her mother agreed to my condition because I was a sage. Even then she took me first to her own mother and got her consent. Where was that land now? What river was it that jumped into the ravines of the mountains? Near a tributary of the Ganga I took her on a clean boulder, and she received my seed and eventually in broad day-light she conceived. Not because she believed in my sense of duty but because she thought I wanted sexual pleasure. Certainly she thought so on the first day, but how long was] with her? I think after a fortnight, she said, 'Sage, the seed has struck. What you want is a son. Suppose it turns out to be a girl, what is to be done?' I replied, T shall return exactly four years from today to this very place. If it is a boy, give him to me. If it is a girl, keep her. You need not show me the girl, you can just inform me. But I am warning you, don't try to lie to me.' How Shuka wept as I pulled him away from his mother when he was

boy of three years. And didn't I, too, weep as my son did, when my father took me away from that fish-filled house near the boat. But my father was then a relatively younger man. His shoulders had become tough through practice of archery, and so was his chest. He wasn't old then like me. And his body was not weak like mine. But Shuka was like me in weeping at going away from his mother, and for four days subsequently he was morose, like me. And after that how fast and sharply he mastered Vedic texts. And by the time he had completed just twelve years! His memory was phenomenal, and he could immediately reproduce orally any portion of the sacred texts, which I had studied. Right from his boyhood he never wasted his time or energy in eating or playing games. His was a total commitment to knowledge, truth and learning. I too was a Brahmacãri, but I never argued that it was the best state of man's life. But my son began to do just that. He maintained that the householder stage and forest-going stage could be dispensed with if one wanted liberation from all bonds. But then I must confess that when he argued against all attachments, he appeared to me to be right. But what about the debt owed to the father? Why does one desire a son, if not to re-pay the debt to the father and to the Guru simultaneously. After a while I believed that, he, too, would accept these obligations. Did I really believe it or was I just indifferent? Well, I, too, was engaged in the quest for the meaning of the Vedas. So was he. He asked me, 'Father, you have studied all the Vedas. First birth, and after that death. These are the twin faces of truth. Between them is all thinking and reflection. Why is one born? Why does one live? After death where does one go? I see nothing beyond these questions. Do you see any thing beyond?'

I answered defensively, 'These are, of course, key questions, child. You must think....'

'It is useless. I am not blaming you for causing me to be born. Yet I find no sense in procreation as such. That is why I have arrived at the firm determination that Brahmacãrya is the supreme stage of man's life.'

'Child, what happens to the debt owed to the father- pitrrna?'

'If birth itself is meaningless, what meaning can the one who causes birth have? And, pray, what is that we are supposed to repay them?'

Even at that point of time, I failed to see that this cold, empty tone and frame were not merely debating points! When a few days later, my son was lying down before my very eyes without water or food, with total nothingness as his frame, I could sense the inner perspective he had accepted. But can one call it strictly a perspective? If not a perspective, what was it? Of course, knowing an answer

would not have helped. ‘If death which might come thirty, forty or sixty years later, comes today itself, this very moment, what difference does it make? I do not want your easy consolation. Answer me from the perspective of life’s basic goal. And weeping ill-suits a sage like you.’..."

Dvaipayana’s sorrow came from the depths, with cumulative force. But before that sorrow could crystallise into language, he struggled hard to cease weeping and worrying as unworthy of a sage and seer like him. So the sorrow got stuck in the middle of his throat. Then, he asked himself, was sage Vasishta, who was moved by the loss of his sons, to jump into the river like a mad man or jump from a high boulder or into the fire? Was he ignoramus, a fool, lacking in wisdom? The sorrow caught in the mid-throat now slowly sank down, and became hidden. His mind was filled with a sense of emptiness. Vasishta’s daughter-in-law, Adrishyanti, came running after him, stopped and said, "The lineage will not die. I carry in my belly a four-month old sprout. If you die, who will look after that child ?" When he heard these words, he who had heaped big dry logs and lit it in order to seek his body’s destruction, moved away from it and stayed alive to take care of his daughter-in-law who was pregnant, Dvaipayana asked, "Which daughter-in-law shall I have to take care of?" The question silenced his mind and his mind became for a while dis-oriented. A little later, the sorrow suppressed within burst its bounds. He who had held his body in tight reins, now wept loudly in that darkness, loosening his frame, wept freely as if he was employing word, sound, syllable and metre.

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Chapter

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HE sat before the heap of ash that was his son, and by the time he returned to his hut with slow steps, it was already dawn. He slept for a while. When he got up the sun was already up. Bhishma got up even later. When the two met in the morning, they didn't know what to say to each other. For Bhishma, there was dense darkness in the early sun's rays. Even the matter he wanted to discuss with Krishna Dvaipayana had evaporated, his enthusiasm for discussing now dampened, merging with the darkness of death. When Dvaipayana looked at Bhishma, he remembered why he had come to call on him, but merely asked, "Did you sleep well?"

All the inmates of the hermitage had planned to go to the pond below to offer the departed soul of Shuka ritual offering of water. When Bhishma went with them, he got a full picture of the hermitage, its life and its inhabitants. The hermitage spread on a mound. Surrounding the mound lay cultivated land. Vaishampayana explained, "We have land enough to grow all our needs of grain and vegetables and fruits." Beyond spread green meadows for grazing the cattle. Below the mound, there was a huge cow- shed housing some five hundred cows. The instruction was given by some fifty teachers, besides outstanding scholars like Dvaipayana and his four disciples. The number of disciples was around two hundred. They not only engaged in scholarly activities but took part in cultivation and animal husbandry as well. Vaishampayana added, "In reality, our Guru did not establish any planned hermitage. It just happened. We four joined him for Vedic studies. Other disciples followed, seeking us. We had to organise the facilities for their food and housing. The Guru had by then completed his wandering. He had no need to travel. We forced him to agree to the establishment of these structures and the staff to manage them."

They all bathed in the pond, stood in the water upto their waists, and offered a water offering to Shuka's soul ceremoniously. While they were at it, there came closer to them two strangers-one wearing the white dress of a sage and mendicant, his face clean-shaven but head full of hair, aged around fifty. He stood on the bank where Bhishma, Krishna Dvaipayana, Paila and other senior scholars stood.

He didn't get into the water and participate in the ceremony. Paila made a note of it. He wondered whether he was from a foreign country, come to study at the hermitage. Then he let the water into the pond as a ritual homage to the departed soul. One of the two strangers introduced himself, "My name is Vrisha. This person is Anaranya. We have done a little Vedic study. We are assailed by doubts on certain points. We have come to get clarification from your Guru, Krishna Dvaipayana himself. But unknowingly we have arrived on a day of sorrow. Our land is very far away. We can stay here for four days and discuss the matter with your Guru. We are in no hurry."

Paila asked, "Do you want to be instructed or have your doubts clarified or have a discussion?"

Vrisha, "Well, we don't think there is much difference between the three. Even if there is, it doesn't matter."

Paila, "Our Guru is right now in no condition to settle points of Vedic dispute and enter into any debate. Only yesterday, his son..."Jaimini intervened and said, "There shouldn't be any heavy or tiring discussion. A small debate is all right. Wouldn't it help our Guru's mind to move away briefly from his sorrow?"

Bhishma and Dvaipayana were following a little behind, supporting themselves with stick.

Other teachers and students left to work on land or look after the cows. Dvaipayana, Bhishma, four chief disciples, sat in one part of the ritual chamber. The Guru sat on deer-skin, Bhishma on tiger-skin, the four disciples and the two strangers on thick grass mattresses.

The Guru asked, "Have the guests had their meal?"

Anaranya, "We just finished it. The milk from your cows is very tasty." There was admiration and gratitude in his tone. Paila initiated the discussion, "Which particular ritual lines of the Vedas do you want clarified?" Normally, whenever a scholar from outside came for discussion, it was Paila who initiated the discussion. He also took a leading role in the ensuing discussion. There was general agreement regarding his scholarly abilities and achievement.

Anaranya, "We can take up the clarification issue later. But first can you explain to us the meaning and purpose of the rite you performed, standing in the water and reciting sacred words?"

Paila, "The Guru's son died. Perhaps you, too, know about it. The water was offered to him for quenching his thirst on the way. Why, don't you follow this custom in your country?"

Anaranya, "How does the water go from here to there?"

Paila, "That is precisely the power of the sacred words."

Anaranya, "All right. Let us do this. Now I want to drink water. I shall send this companion of mine to your well or pond. Let someone among you go with him, take a fistful of water and recite the sacred words. And here place a vessel before me. Would that water from there fall into this vessel here before me? Or would the water go straight into my mouth and quench the thirst? Shall we try the experiment?"

Paila, "It would be inappropriate to apply the sacred ritual words meant for the spirits in the land of death who cannot be -subjected to the test of empirical and physical words, to the living."

Anaranya, "Does it mean that you have seen personally the land of death and such places?"

Paila, 'Why should one see them with these physical eyes? What the Vedas say is..."

Interrupting, Vrisha said, 'Where is the proof that even those who talked about them in the Vedas had actually seen them? How can one believe in the existence of things beyond the grasp of our five senses?"

Paila continued the debate. Krishna Dvaipayana's mind was still drowned in the memory of his son. He remembered that his son, too, had argued on the same lines as the strangers, though he had not gone to the extent of questioning the evidence of the Vedic sages and seers. Shuka had believed that there was a life after death, that there was life before birth, and this was due to the chain of Karma, the chain of action and re-action. Did he really believe in it? Dvaipayana asked himself, "Didn't he know that one cannot snap the chain of Karma simply by destroying the body through starvation? If he did, he wouldn't have done what he did. Or could it be that the ideas of different births, Karma and the rest are just creations of our imagination?" Such thoughts seemed to push his mind towards uncertainty regarding the Vedas. Within, he felt a roaring emptiness. He felt empty not just because he had lost his son, but because he had lost the very meaning of life itself. As the sense of meaninglessness invaded his mind, he sat still, closing his eyes.

Bhishma found the debate very attractive. Not without worry because if all the Vedas were false, as argued by the stranger, then did it follow that rites and rituals mentioned in the Vedas were also false? He asked himself, "The Rajasuya rite performed by my ancestors and other rulers, my own rite of universal conquest or Digvijaya, the Rajasuya performed by my grand-children, Pandavas, in which I had personally participated, and the rendering of fame and honour to the ancestors through them, the very notion of

heaven, were all these mere lies? What sort of debate do these strangers indulge in?" Then Krishna Dvaipayana spoke, "Sumantu, let these three carry on the debate. My head seems to be whirling. Take me and put me to bed."

Vrisha suddenly stopped talking, and said, "Respected elder, you are stricken with sorrow at the loss of your son. I am sorry that we started off the debate today itself. Let us stop now and resume it after four days. We shall stay with you till then."

The Guru said, "No, please carry on. My disciples are as learned as I am. Old age is blunting my intelligence." Then he got up, and immediately Sumantu approached him and took him by his left shoulder.

Dvaipayana went to his hut and then stretched himself on the rush-bed, which was made ready for him. Then he said, "Please cover me with a blanket. After that, you may go." Sumantu spoke, "Revered teacher, their arguments are in a new direction. They are not after the meaning of the texts. They want to question the texts themselves. Theirs is the path of rejection." Dvaipayana didn't reply and Sumantu left. The nothingness invading his mind and heart was growing denser and denser every moment. Earlier the previous day, when the son had died, he had taken solace in the fact that death was a loss of one more individual person. Now what was happening was something far more serious and undermining. Now the idea that death was the supreme truth conquered his mind and heart! He asked himself, "If nothing lies beyond death, then why not enjoy as long as one lives? Then what is enjoyment, happiness? If nothing beyond and outside the play of senses is to be accepted, then does happiness mean mere gratification of our senses? At this age of one hundred and eight, my skin is riddled with wrinkles, my mouth is toothless and cavernous, and food leaves me disinterested. But then when was I interested fully in eating? Now at my age, what is gratification of senses?" Throughout this self-reflection, the notion of death continued to thicken, snapping sharply the flow of his thinking. He tried to recollect the thread of his thought.

Memory became darkness. Then he thought, as he lay face up, on the bed, "What does it matter if I die now this moment or ten years later, as I am impotent to enjoy the experience of my senses?" He felt inclined to agree with that position. His mind stabilised at this question, motionless and frozen. After a while, he thought, "Then Shuka's path was right and what he did was right. Suppose I follow his path, lie down on this bed without food or water, and, given this shrunken body, die within two or three days, then what? What next? It was a terrifying darkness; the darkness of a moonless, starless night. His body began to tremble gently. A kind of fear gripped him. A

fear never before known to him. Even this fear would merge into the moonless, starless night, its last darkness. He asked, But what was meant by merging? What remained after such merging? He felt some consolation at the thought that, if there was nothing, what was there to fear anyway? Then he had the uneasy feeling that the fear gave him more satisfaction than nothingness. He felt the urge to escape his loneliness in the hut by going out. He pushed aside the blanket and sat up. He picked up the staff by the bed, and slowly walked out. He thought that the debate in the ritual chamber must be going on. Yes, it was going on. Paila was a tough debater. But even so he found the challenge flung by the strangers so intractable that he felt like stopping the mind running in the direction of their arguments. Just then he saw a calf coming from the right side. It was a tiny tot of a calf. Perhaps not older than a month. It was fleeing from the cow-shed, frisking. Its soft brown down was shining in the sun-light. Dvaipayana felt an urge to embrace the animal. Realising that if he walked towards it with the staff, it would run away in fear, he walked with slow and cautious steps, casting the staff aside on the ground. It jumped once. But it didn't run far. It was jumping up and down but without forward movement. Dvaipayana called it, stretching his hand in welcome, moving close to it. Afraid that it might give the slip, he quickly got hold of it with both arms. Because of his weakness, he found the calf too strong, and slipped down. He didn't let go his hold. But only for a moment. Then it pulled itself free and fled. He wondered whether it had run away out of fear or playfulness. Then he saw his knee was slightly bruised. He remembered the smoothness of its skin, and wished he had held it a little longer in his embrace. He sat on the ground and watched the calf. He couldn't take it in his embrace. But at least he could continue to gaze at it. The young thing didn't stay put. It was fidgety and sniffed at the grass. But wouldn't pull it out with its teeth.

Meanwhile Sumantu came there. He said, "Revered Bhishma says that it is getting late for him to go back. He wants to take leave of you. He has sent me to find out whether he can do so when you are still in bed."

Dvaipayana, "Bring him to my hut. But first help me reach my hut."

Sumantu handed him the staff, supported his left shoulder so that he could rise. Dvaipayana managed to walk back to his hut. As he lay down and covered himself with a blanket, he felt the force of darkness inside. It was the darkness of death, pervading space like smoke. He was feeling that sitting alone was intolerable, and then Bhishma arrived. After Bhishma was seated near the pillow, Sumantu left.

Bhishma, "I shall be leaving soon."

Dvaipayana, "You came here all the way. But it was impossible to spend even a little time in talking with you. It seems you came to ask me about something."

Bhishma, "Yes, but now I find the question meaningless. Since yesterday, after I reached the hermitage, that has been my feeling. Moreover I have serious doubts about your being able to answer that question. Well, let me spell it out anyway..."At that point Dvaipayana himself intervened to say, "It was you who decided] that it was in accordance with Dharma to perpetuate a lineage through the Niyoga arrangement, and persuaded my mother to agree to it, and sent for me. How is it that you, who were so cock-sure, should now have doubts serious enough to need clarification by me? Forget the opinion of others. Tell me what you have in mind."

Bhishma could not give an immediate answer. He began to search his own mind. Of course, Bhishma had no doubt about the Dharmic validity of the birth of Dhritarashtra and Pandu. Not even a grain of doubt. Not even about the Pandavas' birth. He had categorically condemned Duryodhana's position as wrong. Bhishma asked himself, "Yet, why did I come here to ask about this matter?" He found his own behaviour odd and inexplicable. He asked himself again, "Did I come merely to cement the cracks in my belief?" Then Dvaipayana spoke, "Look here. Right now my own beliefs are caught in a dilemma. Maybe in the company of someone like you, I can resolve my doubts and dilemmas. In this world you are the only one who can take the liberty of addressing me in the first person. You are my brother, too. You have faithfully and consistently practised Brahmacãrya. Why do you plan to go back in such a hurry? Stay with me for some days. Or better still, join the hermitage as a regular inmate!"

Bhishma, "I have assumed the supreme command of Duryodhana's army. I shall have to be back in the camp by tonight and tomorrow we start the war."

Dvaipayana asked astonished, "You?" Bhishma nodded his head to concur. Then he became silent. Once again silence enveloped everything, the silence of the grave-yard. After a brief pause, Dvaipayana continued, "That means you who are personally leading Duryodhana's army can be said to be proclaiming that Niyoga is a violation of Dharma. That means that all your efforts to perpetuate the Kuru lineage, including my contribution to it, are a violation of Dharma."

But Bhishma's mind seemed to be elsewhere, worried about something else. He sat staring at Dvaipayana. Once again the lifeless silence seemed to be standing still, motionless in the hut. Dvaipayana looked back at Bhishma's face, Straight, sharp nose. Eyes so sunken

that they could be filled with the silence of death any moment. Dvaipayana also saw the eyes that witnessed life for longer than a century. Dvaipayana wondered how the eyes looked to others and how they actually were. But he asked himself, who would tell him? But even if he were to ask others, would they have the same feelings as the ones he had about Bhisma's eyes? Then Dvaipayana spoke, as if to break the icy silence, "I have been thinking since yesterday when I cremated my son. The burden of that thought has increased since this morning when those two strangers initiated a debate. Before that question, the issue of whether Niyoga violates Dharma or not fades into insignificance. When we have no answer for the key question, what is the point of breaking one’s head over trivial details?" Bhisma looked at him as if to ask for clarification and elaboration. Dvaipayana continued, "If only we can assign meaning to death, we can assign meaning to life. If life has meaning, then birth and procreating will gain meaning. Then one can evaluate comparatively different modes of birth and procreation."

Though Bhishma was staring at Dvaipayana's face, his sunken eyes were flowing everywhere, unfocussed and uncertain. The scent of death which had been captivating his mind since yesterday, now returned. Both sat dumb, breathing the same air, getting their sights exhausted in the same darkness. After a while, Bhishma got up, saying, "I shall get ready for the journey." Even then Dvaipayana, filled with the scent of death, sat still. Bhishma stood for a minute, and then without waiting for any reaction from Dvaipayana, went back to his hut, supported by the staff.

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Chapter

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AFTER some time, there was the sound of someone running outside the Guru's hut. Within a moment, Puluha came closer, gasping for breath. He was the chief organiser of all activities of the hermitage. He looked after the cultivation and animal husbandry as an overall supervisor. Additionally, he also took classes for one batch of disciples. As he ran in the wind fast towards the Guru's hut the white hair on his head became utterly disordered. He bowed to the Guru and said, "The hermitage is being attacked. Some royal messengers have come. They refuse to listen to all our entreaties. They are adamant that everybody is subject to the king's orders."

The Guru, "What is that royal order?"

Pulaha, "The provincial governor of king Duryodhana has come. He is accompanied by armed soldiers with bows and arrows on horses. There are also war-chariots. They say that war is going to take place there. The allied rulers from different countries have gathered there with their armies. It seems it is a question of the honour of the kingdom. The order requires all subjects to hand over even their cattle forthwith. The hermitages are not exempted from this order. In order to explain and enforce it on the hermitage no less a person than the provincial governor himself has come, and this is meant to be a recognition of the special status of the hermitages."

The Guru was surprised. He was also shocked. Yet he didn't seem panicky. He simply told Pulaha, "Call him here." Pulaha ran back as fast as he came. After a brief pause, the sound of horse hooves could be heard. The Guru got up, walked in the sun towards a near-by boulder, and sat on it. The provincial governor got off his horse and saluted the Guru. He spoke in an entreating voice, "You must have been already informed about the purpose of my visit. May I request you to co-operate in the work of the kingdom."

Dvaipayana, "What exactly do you mean by co-operation?"

The governor, "It seems the hermitage has a large stock of grain. You have five hundred cows, we learn. Also some bulls and calves. When the kingdom is engaged in a battle for survival, if you

surrender all that, it will mean co-operation. Maharaja Duryodhana himself has asked me to convey his respectful greetings to you."

The Guru, "But this is a hermitage. The property of the hermitage does not belong to the king."

The governor, "How do you say that? Please enlighten me."

The Guru, "I have not received even a single gold coin from the king as a gift. The inmates of the hermitage have grown everything through their own effort. Again we labour hard to raise our cattle, collect milk, curds, ghee and beef."

The governor, "All land belongs to the kingdom, to the king. The land you cultivate, on which you graze your cattle, on which you now sit, and the air you breathe, and everything else, belong to the king. Therefore, to say that one has not received royal gifts amounts to insulting the king. It also amounts to the crime of refusing to perform one's duty." There was no attempt in his tone or voice to belittle the sage. But his words also did not show the respect demonstrated outwardly. It was couched in a generalised form, pointing to none in particular but including everyone, answering to a specific description.

The Guru, "Your king has little understanding of the subtleties of Dharma. You see, those engaged in the acquisition of knowledge and pursuit of truth, cannot be subjects of any king. Their hermitages come under the jurisdiction of no kingdom. We accept only Budha Deva, God of learning, who helps all of us to acquire knowledge, as our king. Go and tell this to Duryodhana."

The governor, "Worshipful one, even now I regard you with great respect. I am merely an administrator who executes orders from above. It is upto you to raise the question of subtle points of justice, with the king. But if you do not surrender the goods voluntarily, we shall take them by force. I have some small discretion to give you a little time to make up your mind. I have no authority to do anything more." He bowed to the sage respectfully, got on his horse, and drove towards the store-house. It was located near the huts of the students, towards the kitchen, near a huge riim tree.

Dvaipayana felt as if the ground under his feet had given away. He also felt humiliated. He felt the blow as sharper and stronger than the one delivered to his belief in the truth and value of the Vedas that morning by the strangers in the ritual chamber. It was possible to fight them, win or lose. Even if one lost, one could recover the lost ground. But this king's order would deprive the inmates of food and milk from the next day. The hermitage would have to be closed. It was a crisis he had to face now. He also felt furious. He said to himself, "Shame on kings and their power!"He cursed Duryodhana

several times. He recalled the ritual curses proclaimed by the earlier sages against those who had dared to cause them injustice or injury. Such expression of anger and anguish provided some relief. When he was worried about his helplessness, he suddenly realised that Bhishma was still there on the campus of the hermitage. He blamed himself for not realising this when that governor was there to issue him orders, though in a polite language. The thought lightened his heart. He went straight to Bhishma's hut, supporting himself on the staff. He broached the matter with the old warrior, "Just now the provincial governor had come here." After narrating the incident, he concluded, "The hermitage can be saved only if you call the officer and order him not to carry out the threat."

But Bhishma chose not to reply immediately. His deep sunken eyes were reflecting not merely the outward darkness but also the tremendous scholar of Vedic learning, standing before him. They also seemed to be seeking something.

Dvaipayana who was watching his face and eyes, asked, "Why this silence? Don't you have the authority to countermand Duryodhana's orders?"

Bhishma, "That is not the question. Wasn't sage Vasishta your great grand-father?"

Dvaipayana, "Yes ".

Bhishma, "It seems there was a beautiful white cow in his hermitage. It had udders as large as milk-pots. It used to yield thrice a day, thick milk whose oiliness stuck to one's fingers when dipped into it. Once king Kaushika visited the hermitage and saw that cow. He asked the sage to offer him the cow. He argued that everything in the kingdom belonged to the king by right, and he could takeaway whatever pleased him. Vasishta did not agree. The king ordered his soldiers to seize the cow and take it away. For a split second, the sage stood dumb-struck. Then, gathering courage, he collected the inmates of the hermitage — instructors, disciples, women and children. He supplied them with long clubs and beat up the king and his men till their limbs became severely damaged. Their bodies were swollen with wounds inflicted by the inmates. Anticipating that Kaushika would return with his large army, the intrepid sage raised his own army of inmates from the neighbouring hermitages and surrounding population, took up bow and arrow to lead them. He defeated the king, and saved his hermitage. One result of this was that Kaushika, his royal arrogance now cut to size, gave up his power and position, and became himself a sage, engaged in the study of philosophical and spiritual matters. In that battle, Vasishta lost his sons, but he did not surrender the cow. Well, let me recall. Who told this to me?" Then he added, "Did you yourself narrate this incident to me earlier?"

Dvaipayana, "Yes, yes. My great grand-father did all that."

Bhishma, "Then you, too, follow a similar course of action. Call that official and warn him. If he doesn't heed your warning, then kill him and his soldiers. After that Duryodhana may arrive with his mighty army. By that time, you get ready your own army to counter the challenge."

Dvaipayana, "But I am ignorant of archery. And none in this hermitage knows how to handle bow and arrow."

Bhishma, "Why is this?"

Dvaipayana, "Isn't it the duty of the ruler to protect the learned men with his weapons? I thought it was none of our business, and I wanted to maintain here an atmosphere of peace and non-violence."

Bhishma didn't speak. Dvaipayana went on staring at his face. He had the feeling that the old warrior was laughing within himself. At that time, an instructor came running to report, "They are loading carts with grain lifted out of the store-house. They are untying the cows and herding them away."

Dvaipayana became angry and excited. Raising his voice, he said, "Bhishma, hurry up. Only your order can save this hermitage now. Please, rise. Or should I send the message to the governor that Bhishma is here?"

Bhishma answered calmly, unruffled by the sage's excitement, "I have heard that Vasishta and others were Vedic sages. I have recollection of having learnt some of the ritual texts said to be composed by them. You too, are a Vedic sage. Are you a creator or a compiler of such texts?"

Dvaipayana, "In this dire strait, instead of coming to our aid, why are you asking questions about differential meanings?" He was agitated.

Bhishma, "Krishna, calm yourself. Don't get excited." Then he turned to the instructor to say, "Inform the governor that I am here, and ask him to come here. Tell him that I ordered that not even the smallest object in the hermitage should be touched." After he left, he said to Dvaipayana, "I don't know why, but somehow I am now worried about the question of what constitute the qualities and features of a Vedic sage and seer."

Caught in his own inner turmoil, Dvaipayana was unable to gauge the depth of Bhishma's question. He simply sat staring after the instructor who was running away. Bhishma was also silent. After a while the sound of horse hooves was heard. The provincial governor arrived. He bowed to Bhishma, who said, "It is a customary thing to

collect grain and other goods from the people during a war. These are over and above the normal payments owed to the king. But how could you take the decision to invade and seize the hermitage?"

The governor, "Maharaja, I did not know about your presence here. Also how can I interfere in the affairs of a celebrated hermitage like this all by myself?"

Bhishma, "What do you mean?"

Governor, "I am implementing the order directly issued from the king's court."

Bhishma, "Now I am ordering you: Don't touch this hermitage. Go away immediately from here with your followers. Should the Maharaja ask you for any explanation, mention my name to him."

The governor stood there. Bhishma said, 'T have issued my orders. Now you may go." He bowed to Bhishma, and then departed on his horse.

Bhishma turned to Dvaipayana, "Krishna, I must leave immediately if I have to reach before tonight, which I must. Tomorrow, the war begins." There were ritual words of farewell. Dvaipayana added, "After the war, you move over here into the hermitage." Just then the chariot came near them. The charioteer helped Bhishma to get into the chariot, holding the old man's hand. Krishna could see the chariot and the horses disappear in the dust created by their own pace.

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Chapter

54

THE chariot returned by the same uneven and rough road. The charioteer Sukesha assured his master that the road would be all right after some fifteen miles or so. As he reclined against the pillow, Bhishma felt his back and waist aching. Even the previous night he did feel slight pain, and he should have rubbed oil then itself. As there was too much shaking, Sukesha was holding the reins tightly and driving very slowly. The chariot was distanced sufficiently from the horses ahead and horses behind so that their hooves' dust wouldn't get into the chariot. This was done by Bhishma's own order.

Though they had travelled considerably away from the hermitage, the sense of death, filling his mind, had not yet gone. Maybe it was under suspension for a while during the discussion of the two non-believers. Otherwise it had been with him right from the moment he entered the hermitage, but it took different shapes. The clouds scattered all over the sky, with such variety of shapes and forms. Beyond the road, the trees imperfectly visible, the dust kicked up by the pace of the chariot and the horses, all of them looked like shapes of death. It was an illusion to think of them as embodiments of death. Yet he thought death was a reality, but if it was a reality, how could it be an illusion? Death visited different people in different forms. In the case of Shukadeva it took the form of sapping his body dry through starvation. Immediately he saw that this was not the case, as death did not visit him at its will, but was invited by him, with full consciousness of what he was doing.

This meant that he muted its fierceness, no, not just death's fierceness but the comforts of life as well. In short, he grew neutral to both, taking a stance beyond the reach of both. The chariot was shaking violently. And the mind was wandering away in all directions. Some memory was haunting him. He reflected, "In what form will death visit me? I have lived long enough to feel almost immortal. Well, maybe I would die like a heroic Ksatriya, fighting on the battle- field. But how can that be when I cannot lift a bow and shoot. Yes, I remember it. When was it? Well, Dhritarashtra is eighty-one or eighty-two. It must have been three or four years before he brought together Dhritarashtra's mother and her two sisters, one

elder and the other younger. It was a Svayamvara, a ceremony in which a girl had the freedom to choose the groom of her liking. I believe that one of the three had decided to choose king Shalva, having been earlier in love with him. In that case, why did they arrange a Svayamvara? Did her father do it for the sake of the other two daughters? In such a ceremony, can it be denied that the royal Dharma permits the carrying off of a bride by force? I bound them and put them in the chariot, drawn by horses. How many? Five, I think. After reaching Hastinavati, when I untied them, the ropes had cut into their flesh, forearm and thighs. Thank God, they had not died on the way. 'A curse on royal Dharma'.' she said, Bo you think you can grab anything or anybody by force and win? You can't win me by treating me like a beast, binding my limbs, transporting me this far, and making me live in this prison of a palace. My heart lies elsewhere. With force you can conquer inanimate things. You are a fool who does not know that with physical force you can't win human beings with a mind, heart and will.' What contempt was there on her face! I did not know till then that I could ever feel ashamed before a woman." Suddenly he remembered Vasishta. He wondered whether the sage had also spoken in the same way when king Kaushika tried to take away his cow! He thought to himself, "But I sent back Ambe immediately to king Shalva. Was I wrong? Did Shalva reject her because it would damage his honour and reputation if he now accepted as gift a bride whom he had failed to win through his prowess and valour? Yes, that must have been the reason. He, too, was a king. Is there anyone who holds office but does not use his coercive power to boost his honour? But why did Ambe put the entire blame on me while it was Shalva who had rejected her? It seems she complained against me to sage Bhargava who belonged to the lineage of Ksatriya-hating Parasurama. Bhargava asked her, 'Child, who had done you this injustice? Shalva or Bhishma?' She answered, 'Hove Shalva. But he has rejected me. Let Bhishma who carried me off forcibly marry me. Only then shall I consider myself compensated justly for the injustice done to me. Perhaps sage Bhargava also wanted such an opportunity! Yes, he was anxious to see me break my vow of celibacy. He came to war against me, and gave me the option to either marry Ambe or fight him. Would she have been a good wife to one whom she hated so bitterly? No, her sole interest lay in making me violate my vow of celibacy. Can the Brahmin ever defeat this Bhishma? It is true that Parasuram decimated the Ksatriyas, but then this Bhishma was not alive ". Bhishma asked himself, "How much of the Ksatriya race did he kill? And how much the claim advanced by the Brahmins on his behalf is truth, and how much inflated? When I defeated Bhargava, she is supposed to have jumped into fire and died, unable to endure the situation. It seems she proclaimed before dying that she would be re-born to accomplish only one mission, the death of Bhishma! Well, did

she take birth in Drupada's house hold later or did she have another birth before she was re-born here? Yes, I had forgotten all this, of which I had heard. Now I remember it. Suppose in the war to begin tomorrow her prophecy comes true!...." His body trembled with fear." ....Should I die at the hands of the very woman whom I had won and carried off? No, I am not afraid of dying. But defeat?...." Just then he felt the cold cut into his back. The chariot convulsed for a moment and then steadied itself on a more even road. Then he watched pensively the movement of horse-hooves in the distance, and reflected, "All this business of re-birth, is this true? I am sometimes gnawed by doubt. Well, this morning, those two were arguing against such beliefs. They were saying that whatever cannot be tested by the senses is pure imagination, pure illusion. May be those two are right. A eunuch was born to Drupada. But then such children are born to many! Maybe my enemies, intent on destroying me because I have been the back-bone of the Kuru kingdom, have mixed up legend and fact so that the eunuch may be triggered to kill me..."Bhishma suddenly laughed." How did the enemy know then that there would be this war? And who could have dreamt at that time that I would participate in this war? Even I didn't know then! If that eunuch was born to kill me, he could have by now arrived in Hastinavati and found an occasion to kill me. Maybe this story was put out just to cover up the humiliation of having begot a child like that...." The chariot was now going smoothly on an even road. On both sides of the road stood tall trees. The horses ahead also made less dust than before . As he was watching the well-made road, Bhishma saw once again the image of death. Then he thought, "I shouldn't have gone to that hermitage at all ". Remembering that Shuka had upheld the supremacy of celibacy, he felt proud of his own life of celibacy. Suddenly he felt that the right path of living for him was death, and this made him feel depressed. In his imagination he tried to build up an image of Shuka whom he did not remember to have seen. The conviction that his was the right way of thinking was invading his inner space, and just then he thought that one of the horse-men ahead turned abruptly to the right to follow a quarry. It surprised Sukesha too. He drove fast for a while and stopped the chariot. The horse-men behind also stopped and clustered round the chariot. In less than ten minutes, the horse-men ahead brought two men as captives. One of them was around sixty. The other who looked like the first one's son, was around thirty. He wore dirty dress. His face was sun-baked and of a deeply dark complexion. Their hardened bodies, chest, shoulders and bulging muscles, indicated that they must be making their living from hard, manual work. Both of them stood before the chariot, trembling in fear, with palms joined in salute. One of the horse-men reported, "Maharaja, these fellows have two carts. They are driven by a pair of bullocks. The carts are covered with skin. One of the carts contains three bags of grain. The

other contains tools and implements employed in metal work, metal pieces, metal foil, and the leather-bag used to blow fire in a smithy. Then a fifty-year old woman, another woman of twenty-five, and three children,were walking from the opposite direction. As a soon as they saw us, they fled like thieves into the grove, with the carts. We suspected them to be robbers and bandits. That is why we brought them here".

Bhishma asked them, "Tell me the truth. Who are you? Where do you come from? Where are you heading? Why did you run away and hide like that "?

The old man, "Maharaja, we are metal workers. We belong nowhere. We move from country to country in search of work and livelihood ".

Bhisma, "Why did you hide like that?"

Old man, "It seems there is going to be a war. How should we know about it? While we were travelling this way yesterday, some soldiers seized us in a village, saying that all well-built persons should join the army, they caught hold of my son's hand to take him away. You see, we have never had any experience of handling bows and arrows. We told them that and also that we were metal workers. Then they said we could still be useful and help them in making the metal tips for arrows. We agreed. But when we all entered the village, we managed to give the soldiers the slip. When we saw your men, they looked like the other soldiers. We got scared and ran away to hide ".

Bhishma, "Why did you escape from the soldiers?"

Old man, "Because those who work for a war are not paid grain. They use against us the power of the king, and make us work out of fear. Secondly, folk like us are asked to work in the rear of the war-camp itself by setting up a smithy. We are asked to re-shape and sharpen the metal tips of arrows fallen into our side from the bows of the enemies. We are expected to repair the damaged chariots. And what is the guarantee that the enemies will not attack and kill us from behind? If we go to work at the camp, where are we supposed to leave our wives and children? If we take our women with us to the camp, the soldiers will go at them and enjoy their bodies till they are almost dead. Even a dead body will do for their enjoyment. Why should we, who somehow manage to eke out a living get mixed up with your war?"

Bhishma stared at both of them. Then he got off from the chariot and examined their palms. They were knotted and gnarled with hard physical labour. He asked them, "How far are your carts from here?"

The old man, "Right there, between the yonder trees."

Bhishma walked towards the carts, followed by Sukesha and four soldiers who got off from the horses. Bhishma was bare-foot.

The soft and tender grass was easy to negotiate. There were here and there jagged pieces of stone and twigs. Yet the grass felt so comfortable to his feet that Bhishma enjoyed walking. Then the soldier pointed out the carts. The bullocks were still not unyoked. But they were not scared by the new arrivals. They were simply snorting. The carts did contain the material described by the soldier. But there was no sign of the women or children.

Bhishma asked, "Where are the women and the children?"

Old man, "They have fled, scared. If you promise us that you will not harm them, then we shall call them out ".

Bhishma, "Do you want such a promise from a person like me who is old enough to be your grand-father?"

He spoke humbly, 'You appear to be a king. But these soldiers..."He halted his speech, swallowing the rest of it. He folded his two hands respectfully. Bhishma said re-assuringly, "Call them. None will be harmed ".

The old man shouted thrice, making his voice sound like the Koyal bird. Then he said in words, "Come out. It is me shouting. Come near the carts ". He shouted the words twice. After a pause, the sound of movement came from the clump of trees. As described by the soldier earlier, out came a fifty-year old. The old woman was carrying on her shoulder an ordinary bow. The older girl, too, carried a long bow. The young woman carried a big metal bow, and at her back a quiver of arrows. Bhishma focussed his eyes on that young woman. She was pregnant, fully pregnant. She was walking with heavy steps, unable to carry easily the burden in her belly. She was slim upto the lower part of her chest. The belly was blown like a balloon. They came and stood behind the men.

Bhishma, "Who are these?"

. The old man explained, "This woman here is my wife. That young woman in the rear is my daughter-in-law. These children are my grand-children".

Bhishma, "But you said you do not know archery. Even your women carry bows and arrows ".

Old man, "Purely for self-defence. And to hunt small animals of the forest..."He swallowed the rest of his statement.

Bhishma stared once again at the pregnant woman so intensely as

if to devour her with his sunken eyes. Then he said, "All right, you may now go your way. But these are times of war. Avoid the main roads. Maybe you should spend four or five days in a village before venturing out. Try to hide your grain in a good place." . Then he got into the chariot, adjusted the pillow and reclined against it. As he walked back to the chariot he found the tender grass pleasant to his feet. They resumed their journey. The trees lined the road on both sides. From the sides of the chariots one could see the white, cotton clouds in the sky. But Bhishma did not see them, for his sight was blocked by the image of the pregnant woman with her full-blown belly. The chariot didn't wobble much now, because the road was a bit sandy the wheels made a soft hissing sound which pleased him. The steady movement added to his pleasure. He began to doze, and adjusting the pillow further he went to sleep. It was too warm for a blanket, and the sleep pulled him away from the waking world. Yet he was also conscious of the movement of the chariot. He had a vague feeling that they had been travelling a long distance. After a while when one of the wheels got stuck, he was jolted out of sleep. Suddenly a thought started to rise from the bottom of his brain and bubble on the surface: "After Vichitraveerya's death, she ordered me to marry. She, my mother, wanted me to perform Niyoga on the two widows of my step-brother, assuring me that it wouldn't violate my vow of celibacy ". He felt "Maybe I should have heeded her words ". Then scratching his head, he opened his eyes. Out there the limitless sky spread in blue, not black. He chided himself that he had not yet given up the idea of hermitage, which continued to fascinate him.

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Chapter

55

AS the awareness of the distinction between the seer and the collector of vedic verses, pervaded his mind, he found release from the feeling of death. Feeling lighter, Dvaipayana slept in his hut, covering himself with a blanket. One by one the series of misfortunes battering him lost their grip over his consciousness. Yes, one could endure a son's death, even the discourse challenging the foundations of Vedic wisdom by debate, he felt, but how could one counter the royal order to loot the hermitage. The thought made him furious. And it also reminded him of his great grand-father. He remembered that it was Bhishma who had reminded him of it. He felt like cursing Duryodhana with total destruction in the war. Meanwhile, the same instructor who had come earlier, came running once again and spoke loudly, "Revered Guru, the same provincial governor has returned with his staff. This time they are grabbing the grain without uttering even a single word ".

The Guru got up and said, "But right in my presence, Bhishma gave his orders, didn't he?"

The instructor, "We tried to point it out to him and obstruct them. The governor told us, 'We pretended to go away at that time because we did not want to humiliate the old man. We follow only one order, the order from the throne. And in the court there is no respect for the words of old and useless people. By tomorrow morning, the grain and other items should reach the battle- field."

The Guru, "Is there no way to prevent them?" As he asked the question, he recalled to his mind the curses. But then he also remembered those two debaters in the ritual chamber. He wondered if cursing really produced any effect in the material world. The instructor had informed that they had come with a posse of soldiers. He asked himself: "Why did my great grand-father, capable of spelling curses, prefer to use the clubs? Why did he, the second time, collect a group and fight with bows and arrows?" Questions like these made him acutely aware of some significant loss. The sorrow that had been withheld the previous day now began to flow into tears. Yet he didn't feel like crying freely. When he realised painfully that the

inmates of his hermitage did not have the capacity to confront men on horseback, carrying bows and arrows, he felt too weak even to sit down. He simply lay down on the mattress covered with a blanket. His mind was benumbed and his head filled with water, making him wonder whether the moment of his'death had arrived.

He continued to lie down.

In the evening, Pulaha entered the hut. With him came the four chief disciples—Paila, Vaishmpayana, Jaimini, and Sumantu.

The two strangers were there. Dvaipayana tried to recollect the names of the two, and at last got them — Vrisha and Anaranya.

The Guru was too weak to sit up. The rest of them surrounded him. Pulaha spoke, "Perhaps tonight we can manage to feed ourselves. That too, when we begged them they left behind enough provisions to last for tonight. We have no option but to close down the hermitage and send the inmates away to fend for themselves. The problem is: If they all go away, who will be there to cultivate and sow for the next harvest? If we don't do it, then there shall be no harvest. That means, of course, that we shall never be able to open the hermitage again ".

Paila, "Well, let us remain here, living on wild roots, fruits and berries. Some of us have no home or family to go back to. Where can these persons go?"

Everybody agreed with Sumantu when he said "They haven't merely looted the provisions from the hermitage. They have done the same thing in the surrounding villages. Those villagers are now forced to dig for roots. So, if all of us try to collect roots and berries, how long can we manage it? Can we find animals to hunt? Anyway, we do not know how to hunt ".

Jaimini suggested, "Let us curse with the power acquired by our Vedic studies that Duryodhana's party should suffer defeat in the war ". Immediately, Vrisha intervened, "You see, we came here via Panchala. There also this kind of looting was going on in the villages. They belong to the Pandava party, don't they? People there also are cursing similarly. If their curses are valid, then Pandavas will be defeated, and if yours are valid, then Kauravas will be defeated. Now, only one party can win or am I wrong? Of course, it is possible that both sides might get killed. How can both sides be defeated in the same war?"

Jaimini persisted, "But our curse, because we have studied the Vedic texts, will produce greater power ".

Anaranya cried, "Then why didn't you kill the governor and his men with your curse? Or turn them all into physically handicapped?"

Everybody got angry but nobody spoke. Their faces registered total despair and directionlessness. Even in the darkness of the hut and its frozen silence, the despair was perceivable.

After a while Pulaha spoke decisively, "At least we can now do one thing. Let us count those among us who are brave and ready to fight. Then assemble them. Let us move in the darkness of the night. They should have stored our goods on the way to the battle-field. Let us rush at them in the night, set fire to their camp, and kill at least some by attacking them. Then let us send away the grain in the same carts and hide them in the dense forest. As for the cows, let us drive them away in all directions and go with them. If tomorrow, the royal forces return to the hermitage they will find nothing, neither men nor material. We must make the operation appear like one by robbers. Now what do you say to this Paila, Jaimini, Vaishampayana and Sumantu?"

Not even one of the four replied. They were plunged in thought. Meanwhile, the Guru himself spoke, "The death of anyone of these four would mean the loss of one part of the Vedic texts I have been compiling and collating all my life. There will be none left, if they die, to carry forward this wisdom to the future generations effectively. Hence, let them not be in this expedition ".

The two strangers laughed knowingly, with just a shade of cunning and irony. Pulaha did not hear in full the Guru's reply as his mind was absorbed in some other matter. After a minute, he could say, "We can do yet another thing. We are about two hundred and fifty in all. Let us scatter and go in different directions, go to villages not visited by the royal soldiers. We shall inform the villagers in advance of our visit. Let us get their grain packed into pots and other vessels, shift them to the forests and hide them there. Let us cover the pits with something so that they won't be spotted. Let us also organise the helpless villagers into fighting forces, and lead them in the night to attack the camping soldiers of the king. If we can build up popular resistance, rouse their fear of the soldiers about it, and organise them, then the soldiers will pretend to be implementing the royal order without actually implementing it. People will be able to breathe!"

Vaishampayana asked, "Is this the duty of the hermitages?"

Pulaha answered in a firm tone, "Otherwise the existence of the hermitage will turn out to be meaningless."

Vaishampayana enraged Pulaha by saying, "Don't talk about meaning and meaninglessness. My experience in learning from the Guru about such matters through the study of Vedas exceeds your knowledge of agriculture and animal husbandry." They exchanged

hot words of anger and mutual recrimination. Pulaha even stood up, raising his hand. Vaishampayana also stood up. Sumantu intervened between the two, saying, "It is a waste of time now to indulge in such wrangles. It is for our Guru to decide on the affairs of the hermitage. Let him tell us what is to be done."

The Guru slept, his eyes closed. His mind could not work fast enough now to arrive at an immediate decision regarding the future course of action for the hermitage. In fact, his mind was flowing in other directions.

Pulaha got up and left. His face showed the firmness and determination to die in the cause of the hermitage. The two strangers left with him.

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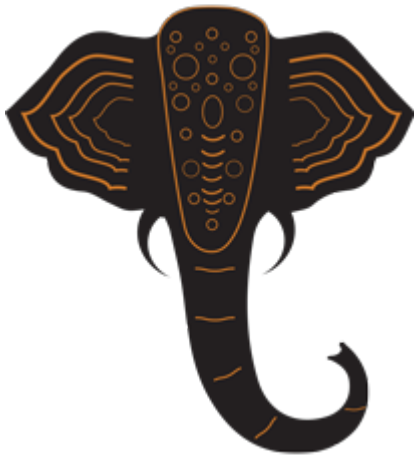
PART THIRTEEN



Chapter 56

SANJAYA got off from his horse right in front of Dhritarashtra's palace. Though the winter had set in, he was sweating. The horse too was sweating. His hands, face, body, and hair were all filled with dust. Before he tethered the horse, a servant-maid rushed out and said, "The Maharaja and Queen heard the sound of your horse's hooves, and asked me to run and see if it was you. Uncle Vidura is with them."

He told the servant, "Arrange to give water for the horse to drink. Also one mug of water for me."

He jumped from the steps and entered the royal chamber. Before Sanjaya spoke, Dhritarashtra complained, "You delayed your arrival by three days. We have been waiting anxiously even without sleep. Tell us quickly what happened."

Dhritarashtra sat up on the large couch on which he was reclining against a pillow, covered with a blanket. On the same couch, Gandhari, the queen, reclined against another pillow. She turned her blind-folded eyes towards Sanjaya, sensing his arrival through sound. In a small shelf on the opposite wall, a lamp with a thick wick was burning. Vidura was sitting below, covered with a white blanket on a wooden plank.

Sanjaya opened his account, "The war began actually only this morning. I watched the proceedings upto this after-noon, and immediately left for here."

Dhritarashtra, "Why was it delayed? We learn that revered Bhishma returned from Krishna Dvaipayana's hermitage three days back itself."

Sanjaya, "Yes, he returned. On our side, we were ready. But there was no agreement as to who should start the first move. The grand-father was adamant that they should start as they were the ones who had come to war against us. In fact, that was what happened eventually. Well let me recall. Three days back the morale of the enemy side suddenly collapsed. It seems that they had almost decided to call off the war, send away the allied armies, and proceed

to the forest. That is why they delayed the starting."

Dhritarashtra asked his wife, "Had they done so, the unnecessary loss of life through war could have been avoided. Don't you agree, Devi?" Then, turning to Sanjaya, "Tell us how their morale collapsed first, and how it came to be revived. Please give us all the details."

Sanjaya, "I could easily gather information relating to our side. Even amidst the bustle of the war, Maharaja Duryodhana, whenever he caught sight of me, would ask me to give a detailed account of our daily successes in the battle. I am also in touch with the spies we have planted in the enemy camp. I shall give you the details I have gathered through these and other sources. Of course, our enemies, too, have spies in our camp. Through the spies, they are able to assess crucial factors like who our allies are, who among them are most enthusiastic and committed, and their relative strength and weakness. It seems four nights ago, Arjuna was struck by a sudden thought. He realised that the head of the opposing army was his own grand-father Bhishma who had brought them up, supported by none other than his teacher in archery, Dronacharya. Duryodhana and the others were, of course, his own brothers. He is believed to have been assailed with the doubt: Was it Dharma to fight them in a war? He was also tormented by the consideration that, even if one set aside the question of killing the kin, the war would decimate the bulk of Ksatriya males of Aryavarta. In that case, the purity and chastity of our Ksatriya women will be destroyed when others, especially those of lower castes, carried them off. It was not unlikely that the sexual urge of the Aryan women bereft of Aryan males might force them to go after men of lesser castes. That would lead to the violation of Dharma through confusion of castes and communities. Arjuna said, 'All this would result from our desire for kingdom. Anyway old age is creeping upon us. Let us go away to the forest, set up a hermitage and study the Vedas. When all is said and done, Duryodhana is our brother. Let him enjoy the kingdom.' After being tortured by such doubts throughout a sleepless night, he refused to fight in the morning. Poor Dharmaraja was confused and helpless. After all, he is well-known for his commitment to Dharma, isn't he?"

Nodding his head Dhritarashtra in the dim light of the lamp, said "Yes, yes."

Sanjaya, "Though Nakula and Sahadeva didn't want to agree with this way of thinking, their loyalty and obedience to their elder brother are absolute. Bhima was not present at that time. It seems he was camping in the kitchen to take care of his stomach because he knew that once you set out for the battle-field in the morning, you had nothing to eat till late in the night when the day's fighting ended."

Dhritarashtra asked, "Whatever you may say, Arjuna is not a bad fellow. Am I not right, Vidura?" Vidura did not give any reply. He sat motionless like the pillar against which he was resting his back. Dhritarashtra understood the meaning of his silence. He asked, "What happened next, Sanjaya?"

Sanjaya, "Naturally, there was commotion and confusion among the commanders of the enemy's army. Some, of course, felt ^PPy ^at they had temporary relief from the war fever which seizes one on the day prior to the beginning of the war. The news reached the common soldiers. They were jubilant, saying to each other in whispers." No war, no war. We can now go back to our homes, our towns and our countries.' They jumped with joy, shouting, and clapping their hands. Bhima got to know of these developments. He left in the middle the meat and rice he was eating, and ran to his brother and asked him, 'Arjuna, if you are scared, take off to Upaplavya city, and sleep warmly in your bed. I shall do the warring.' Arjuna replied, T have raised the question of Dharma, and it has nothing to do with being scared.' Arjuna was Enraged when Bhima said, 'Cowardice always takes the guise of Dharma.' Emotions rose so high that the brothers almost fought out the issue ..."Dhritarashtra intervened to ask, "Did they fight it out?"

Sanjaya, "They would have, but at that Dhrishtadyumna, Draupadi appeared on the scene, Bhima was followed by Draupadi who chided Arjuna for his Dharma of cowardice. Arjuna is said to have become very angry with her, too. He ridiculed the entire womankind by saying that all calamities are caused by women. It was then that Krishna intervened, saying: 'None of you say anything more now. I shall explain to Arjuna and bring him round.'

"Then he took hold of Arjuna's hand and pulled him away to his tent. The whole day, that is, after-noon, evening and night, he talked to Arjuna and indoctrinated him. By yesterday morning it seems he succeeded in restoring Arjuna's mind to its original position."

Vidura, breaking his silence for the first time, "What sort of counsel and doctrine did Krishna impart?"

Dhritarashtra almost shouted, "Isn't that fellow Krishna the son of a whore, full of tricks and strategies?"

Sanjaya continued, "At first Krishna instructed only Arjuna in his doctrines. Then others joined to listen to him. Especially the other commanders. Even some non Ksatriyas, too. The doctrine remained no longer a secret imparted only to Arjuna. This was its gist: War means death of men and orphaning of women. Later surviving women go to men of other caste or race, through force or voluntarily. These things are bound to happen. But why do you think it is

violation of Dharma only if it happened to Ksatriya women only? Is chastity and purity matters of concern only for Aryan women? Why not for women of other groups? Was your great grand-mother Satyavati an Aryan? Was Bhishma's mother Ganga an Aryan? Was Ulupi whom you married and with whom you lived for a year an Aryan? In the past, how many non-Arya ns have blended with our lineages? Is not your daughter-in-law Uttare's mother Sudeshne, though an Aryan, a person from the Süta caste? If there is to be chastity, it must be for women of all groups, ours as well as theirs. Any attempt to discriminate in this matter amounts to insolence and arrogance. Well, these words of Krishna cheered the common soldiers present, and they became so joyous that they clapped."

Dhritarashtra, "Oh you, trickster!"The blind old man's face was clouded by despair. Vidura who was sitting close by began to stare at Dhritarashtra's face. Though blind, the Maharaja seemed to be sensing that Vidura was staring at him. He asked his wife, "Lady, what do you say?" She was wavering, uncertain of what she should say or do. Gandhari remembered that Krishna had pressed both his legs and saluted him when he was here.

Sanjaya continued the account, "Krishna further told Arjuna, 'Now as for your reluctance to fight Bhishma and Drona. You know that Duryodhana rejects your claim to be sons of Pandu. Since Bhishma and Drona have joined his side, they must be taken to have accepted Duryodhana's position on the question of the legitimacy of your birth. If you think that these two old men are committed to Dharma, then it follows that you brothers are all bastards, born out of wedlock, your mother Kunti is a whore. That means you will be yourself accepting all this if you attach any moral difficulty to the issue of fighting and killing Bhishma and Drona. Would you agree with the claim that you are the son of a whore?' At this Arjuna was furious and he asked Krishna what nonsense he was indulging in. Krishna said to him, 'Don't lose your temper. I am only trying to make you see the implications of your own conception of Dharma. Well, didn't you say that Dharma was bigger than a kingdom? Yes, it is bigger than the kingdom. Those who stand in the way of realising Dharma may die. In your efforts, you, too, may die. That is not the point. The point is the commitment to, struggle for, Dharma. Therefore, if you now refuse to fight, you will be guilty of violating Dharma. Not only that. The whole world will proclaim you a coward. Even if you retire, Bhima is bound to carry on the war. Dhrishtadyumna will not give up the war. Nakula and Sahadeva will fight. Dharmaraja himself will fight according to his ability. I am also there with them. Yuyudhana is there. Then Abhimanyu, Ghatotkacha, and Draupadi's five sons. If you feel like it, go away and take rest, meditating on the meaning of Dharma.' Well, gradually Krishna succeeded in turning Arjuna's mind towards the war."

Gandhari said, "Yes, he is such a wizard with words." These words of compliment she was paying to Krishna irked Dhritarashtra. He looked at her with disagreement. He didn't know that she had turned her eyes covered with a white band towards the wall. There was utter silence inside. Only outside the palace, there was noise indicating that the day was still not over. The noise of wheels of carts whirring. The impact of horse-hooves on the road. Voices uttering, 'Yes', 'Lift', and 'push', blending with the wind. Dhritarashtra understood from such sounds that materials and provisions were being transported to the battlefield. Then it occurred to Gandhari that Krishna's words were deceitful and designed to cheat. When she realised that Krishna was equating her and Kunti, balancing their weights, she inwardly admired her husband as cleverer than she. For a moment, she interpreted the war as, Duryodhana's efforts to proclaim to the world his mother's extraordinary chastity and purity. Before she could finish thinking on these lines, Dhritarashtra spoke.

He said, "Sanjaya, you said the war began this morning under the supreme command of uncle. Tell me what was the war like till you left? In that time how far have Kunti's sons retreated? How many dead on their side? Give us the detailed account."

Sanjaya, "Oh! How shall I describe it! Our armies are spread wide and far like the very ocean! Its supreme commander, our grand-father Bhishma, is like the mighty Himalaya mountains, the home of the rivers which finally give the ocean its water. How shall I describe the way he stood in his war chariot right in the centre of the battle-field! He stood like a mountain peak. The zeal of the horses white as moon-light! And the other mighty warriors, surrounding their supreme commander, exuding war-zeal! And what incredible bravery of Bhishma, crowning the valour and glory of them all! The king of Kashi, who had in the past defeated the Gandharvas at one stroke and sent them to the land of Yama, the land of death, had arranged the Svayamvara of his three daughters. Then Bhishma displayed matchless valour, upheld the name and fame of the Kuru lineage, raising it higher than the noon-sun. He is invincible, our Bhishma. Bhishma, standing in his splendid chariot, tested his mighty bow, as tall as a man, by shooting a trial arrow. The thundering sound of the arrow leaving the bow boosted the valour and war-zeal of our soldiers and struck terror in the hearts of our enemies. Then..."At that point, Dhritarashtra turned towards Gandhari and said, "Lady, are you listening?" Her face was turned towards the face of Sanjaya, the source of the words recounting the events of the war. Her face was a medley of emotions — joy, enthusiasm and sadness. But Sanjaya did not notice anything outside himself, totally absorbed in his own performance as a narrator, in the rise and fall of the rhythm of his voice, his own narrative skill and its display. Vidura who sat near by was so still and silent that he was as good as being

absent. On the shelf, the lamp burnt steadily without a flicker.

Sanjaya continued, "Immediately after our unconquerable Supreme commander lifted his giant metal bow and shot the first arrow of fury, our men blew conches, beat the drums, and blew the bugles made of horn. Before starting the battle, everyone on our side imbibed the Soma juice which gave them the power of Indra, the king of Gods, and found themselves in high spirits. Has there ever been any limit to Maharaja Duryodhana's generosity and liberality where the supply of the Soma juice, the Indra-inviting potion, is concerned? He had distributed cartloads and potful of the immortal Soma juice. How shall I do justice, in narrating, to the subsequent deeds of the roaring ocean of our mighty soldiers drunk now with the death-denying Soma juice? When the very ocean rushes onwards, how can the sandy shore resist it? The enemy was already vanquished in spirit at this sea of soldiers. The enemy horses were so frightened that they threw off their riders and thod on some of them. The enemy elephants ran helter-skelter and killed many of their own men. The chariots dashed against each other, their bodies and wheels damaged in the turmoil, as the charioteers screamed in agony. I wondered why such chicken-hearted fellows should come to fight!"

Dhritarashtra, "Did any important warriors die on their side?"

Sanjaya, "I had no opportunity to count how many thousands of their soldiers died. I did know of the death of one of their major warriors, Sweta, the son of Virata's senior wife, and Virata, as you know, is an in-law of the Pandavas, no, I am so sorry for the mistake, of the sons of Kunti. Soon after that I rode fast here because I knew that you would be anxious for the news of the war. By now how many might have been killed! Can mounds of sand withstand the rushing sea? What can tender leaves do against a typhoon? How can banana plants stand against the onslaught of a mad elephant? Nobody, not only in this world, but in the other two worlds of heaven and hell, can be as foolish as these sons of Kunti to have taken on the mighty Kauravas in a war!"

Thus ended Sanjaya's eye-witness account of the great war. The narration ended but it continued to ring in the ears and mind of Dhritarashtra. Suddenly silence engulfed the room. The faintly burning lamp was silent, as usual. The noise outside the palace of the carts and chariots moving, with their animals, only helped to accentuate the sense of silence within the palace. After a brief pause, Dhritarashtra clapped his hands, and when he heard the servant-maid arrive he ordered, "Tell the chief keeper of royal horses to give Sanjaya two horses as a gift for bringing us the good news from the battle-field. And Sanjaya, I wish you bring me every day such happy news of our victories."

Sanjaya, "Maharaja, let it be my good fortune to receive from you such handsome rewards every day. But it is impossible to collect the news of the day and bring it to you on the same day. The information has to be gathered from different places and sources. I can promise you that as soon as I collect significant news I shall ride back here on the horses you have offered me as gift and give you the news. May the compassion of the queen also be there on us. My wife is a poor person who is in need of ornaments." Dhritarashtra prompted the queen to offer a gift.

Gandhari immediately took a gold bangle from her left wrist and offered it to him. After receiving it, Sanjaya who had been so long standing while narrating the account of the war, spoke, "I shall now go home. I have had no sleep these three days, and since this morning I haven't eaten anything." Then he left.

As the sound of his steps slowly vanished beyond the palace, Dhritarashtra said, "Vidura, your silence suggests your disapproval of the good news, your unhappiness at it. Do you think I cannot sense it? When Sanjaya has brought such happy news from the war front, you have sealed your lips! Have you been crying?"

Gandhari joined her husband in this exercise in irony, "He will now go home and when he gives Kunti the news of the war he will weep loudly, I am sure!"

Dhritarashtra ordered, "If you have no desire to share with us our joy at the glad tidings, you don't come here from tomorrow."

Vidura, "Even this evening I am here because you had sent for me, Maharaja."

Dhritarashtra, "The only mistake of my life has been the desire for your company."

Vidura said nothing. He was silent for a while, and he knew that the Maharaja heard even his silence speak. Then he got up and said, "Queen, may I now have your permission to leave." Without waiting for a response, he adjusted the blanket over his shoulders and head, and left. When he reached the outer yard he found Sanjaya waiting for him. Without being actually invited, Sanjaya began to walk by himself along with his horse. To the left, in the Süta colony, in the light of the torch, there were people arranging for the loading and transportation of provisions for the war front. The path to Vidura's house on the river bank was not busy with any traffic.

Vidura said, "Let's eat at my place. We can talk then."

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Chapter 57

EVERYBODY had gone to bed. Kunti, too. Only the cook was waiting for his master, squatting patiently before the dim lamp, occasionally dozing. In the night, Sanjaya did not eat anything excepting porridge, a mixture of corn flour, honey and milk. There was also the usual rice cooked in milk.

When Sanjaya was chewing the wheat-cake, Vidura asked, "Why did you tell so many lies in your account of the war?"

Sanjaya was astonished, "Me? Telling lies!"He didn't say anything more. His jaws which were chewing stopped their movement. He heard the swishing sound of the river flowing below. He thought, "In my uncle's house, this sound is always there, day and night, the sound of the flowing water. In the silence of the night, this was the only audible sound." Then he recalled with disgust what he had suffered for three days on the front — the noise and stench of men, horses and elephants, their movement, clash and waste matter.

Vidura, "You said that the hearts of the enemies trembled when Bhishma's bow sent an arrow with a roar. Can one believe that an old man who is one hundred and twenty years, and whose body is shrivelled and wrinkled, can lift a huge metal bow and shoot? Even if a person in the prime of youth does it, would the sound go beyond the immediate vicinity, beyond the commotion of war, let alone reaching the enemy camp? Well, as for your comparison with the ocean, tide, tempest and typhoon, the less said the better!"

Vidura's point began to sink slowly into Sanjaya's mind. His jaws resumed their activity. Stopping the activity of turning over the chewed cake over his tongue, he asked, "How else should one describe the war?"

Vidura answered simply and briefly, "The truth. Exactly as it happened and as your eyes saw it."

Sanjaya started chewing again. He began to hear once again the swishing of the river. He was wondering whether this sound was due to the water touching the steps or due to whirls in the water. He remembered his wife, and felt an urge to go home and give her the

gold bangle. He thought, "May be she will be asleep or she may be awake worrying about my safety on the battle-field, tossing in her bed." When the war began in the morning, he was at the rear. All he heard was the shouting of the men to rouse themselves and others, the trumpeting of the elephants, and the swishing sound of arrows flying in the air. But he saw nothing with his own eyes. He just remembered having seen the face, the frightened face, of the soldiers who announced to him that the war had begun. He thought to himself, "If I were to go into the thick of the fight, wouldn't I be exposed to the danger of being pierced by any one of the thousands of arrows and spears that were being sent all over the place? Why should I, a mere watcher and narrator, die, instead of recording and relating the events? I only heard our men shouting with glee, 'Sweta is dead', as if they were announcing the death of an animal in a hunting expedition. But who was he? He was supposed to be Virata's eldest son. Who was Virata? He was the one who went for that cow-seizure, and now an old man whose daughter had married Arjuna's son. Even to collect this meagre information I had to run round to four persons." Then he swallowed the chewed matter, and turned to Vidura, "Uncle,I saw with my own eyes the grand-father going in a chariot drawn by white horses. In front of him lay the metal bow and arrows. He was sitting on a cushion, resting against a pillow, so that he wouldn't get tired. Can a person of his age fight directly himself? But the fact that a person like him is amidst them would enthuse younger warriors. That is for sure."

Vidura, "You should have said just this, the simple truth."

Sanjaya, "You know very well that my father, when alive, was a minister in Dhritarashtra's court. He used to say before his death, holding this eating right hand in his wrinkled palm, as his farewell advice, 'You must always give happy tidings to those in power and office. You can be sure that there has never been, and will, be a person in power, especially one on throne, who can stomach unpalatable news. Never forget this point when conveying news to kings.' Moreover, uncle, we are Sütas. And isn't it our community's occupation to glorify and praise the valour, wisdom and pomp of our kings?"

Vidura, too, became aware of the swishing sound of the flowing river. He felt happy that he had shifted his residence from the town, near the palace, where he would have had, first thing in the morning, to listen to Dhritarashtra, sitting in front of him, nodding at his words like a cow, getting bangings from him for saying even one unpleasant word. But now he was here on the river bank, happy with the steps leading to the river, and the river itself. He would now feel that something essential was missing if he didn't hear the swishing of the river. Sanjaya asked again, "Uncle, isn't that our caste occupation?"

Vidura, "Sanjaya, your father Gavalgana was younger than me. And remember I am a younger brother of Maharaja Dhritarashtra, in terms of our kin relationship. It seems I am six or seven days younger than Dhritarashtra. Had I taken to that occupation of the Süta caste, I would have been the minister of the Maharaja. But the Maharaja knew that I lacked competence in that traditional occupation, and hence he appointed your father to that position. As you are aware, right from the beginning I have been doing nothing excepting uttering what I have considered truth, no matter how unpleasant to the listeners, though, of course, in a gentle language."

Sanjaya, "But then you are a brother of the Maharaja."

Vidura, "Let me not go into the details of what kind of brother, now. All Sütas are brothers to the royal lineages. And brotherly duty does not consist only in servility and lying. Though your father followed the Dharma of the Süta caste, he didn't become wealthy. Let that be. You are not a ruling king. Not a minister. Merely a reporter of news to the king's father. I urge you simply to convey the truth that you have witnessed or truth that you have gathered from trustworthy witnesses. Never be afraid of the master's rage. Or never be greedy for things, like that gold bangle in your left palm."

Sanjaya, "Then you suggest that I don't report any news. The Maharaja never assured me that he would pay me salary for any news, pleasant or unpleasant, and that he would not remove me from service abruptly out of anger. In such a case, what else can I do? The sort of rewards granted on the spur of the moment are the only kinds of rewards I can get. I receive no other return for my labours. Do you know that my buttocks are bleeding because of the horse ride all the way to the war front, the agony of suffering the stench there, and the quick return on horse to the palace?" He was still eating. And the rice did not need to be chewed as much as the wheat-cake. In any case, he could not have chewed any more. Hence he quickly gulped the rice.

Vidura heard only the noise of the gentle flow of the river. He realised that his relations with Dhritarashtra had never snapped in spite of the fact that he never hesitated to utter unwelcome statements. He thought, "No real breach of relations. At worst, he would call me ungrateful. I would frankly criticise his ideas and activities. Then we would not speak to each other for four days. I would be sulking at home. Then he would send for me, and I would go. Always he sent for me, and I never went of my own accord. But then why did I go simply because he sent for me? Why did not I break off totally?" His mind began to probe into this matter." Yes, all this talk of brothers is just show of politeness. Though we have a common father, I am his servant because my mother was a servant-

maid. Not really a brother. Actual, he never really developed right from the start a genuinely brotherly affection for Pandu, the son of his step- mother. But my work as a servant was naturally to serve. My work turned out to be multifarious services to him — to take hold of the hand of the blind boy, and take him round the palace court-yard, sometimes on the river-bank, tell him stories, answer his hundred questions, eat in his company, be a physical support for him, and spend so much of time with him and on him. Well, all this led to the growth of his deep dependence on me, perhaps! May be I, too, grew dependent on his company! Had I depended on his salary only, like Sanjaya, and had I not had other resources of my own like land, house and cattle, I am sure I would have been as servile as Sanjaya, poor fellow." Just then Sanjaya reached the end of his eating, signalled by the act of lifting the plate and drinking straight from it the remaining milk and rice.

Vidura, "Sanjaya, you can do one thing. Dhritarashtra may want to hear only good tidings about his side in the war. But I am interested in the truth, only truth. You deliver to the Maharaja what he wants to hear, but for me give the genuine facts. I shall pay you for supplying the news about the whole war, ten gold coins. But remember this is purely between you and me, and nothing to do with the Maharaja." Sanjaya interrupted, "Uncle, you are the eldest of our community. You are its chief. Shall I give you news in return fora salary from you? Am I also not interested in knowing the exact facts? Sure, I shall pass on to you the actual facts as I manage to get them. I shall give the Maharaja what he wants to hear, collect from him what he promises, and perhaps even a little more..."

Vidura, interrupted Sanjaya, and said, "No, do not talk about grabbing extra money or reward. Let the master give or not, but let it be my pleasure to pay you. You convey to him also the truth. If he doesn’t like the truth, he might order you not to see him from the following day. All right, if he says that, don’t show him your face. Just give me the news of the war as truthfully as possible. Do you know why I am emphasising this point to you? Let them not get the impression that the Sütas are only cheap flatterers of the rulers. Let them know that we have the courage to speak out the truth, come what may. You know about Yuyutsu. He is a son produced by Maharaja Dhritarashtra, though through a servant-maid. He had the guts to tell even such a self-obsessed person like Duryodhana to his face whatever he thought was right and true. Now he has gone over to the Pandavas. He said he would fight for the side he thinks is just."

At this revelation, Sanjaya asked, astonished, "Really?"

Vidura, "Well, if you can show his courage, you, too, will gain the reputation of being a self-respecting, respectable person in the eyes

of others..."

Though he had finished his meal, Sanjaya continued to sit. He cast his relaxed eyes on the floor. Vidura got up, saying, "Poor fellow, let the cook sleep. It is very late." Then Sanjaya, too, got up. Both went out and washed their hands. The cook closed and bolted the doors of the kitchen.

Sanjaya who was proceeding towards his horse, came back and said to Vidura, "One important piece of news. It isn't the kind of news that I can give to the Maharaja. It seems there was a quarrel between the grand-father and Karna. As a result, Karna swore that he wouldn't fight as long as Bhishma led their side. He is supposed to have gone back to his tent, sulking."

Vidura, "Never conceal such important news from the Maharaja. Report it to him. How did the quarrel develop?" Vidura drew the blanket more closely round his body. A chilly wind blew from the front-yard of the house. The sound of the river, now resembling the sound of milk boiling over, could be heard clearly coming from down the steps.

Sanjaya, "It seems, Duryodhana asked Bhishma, 'Grand-pa, how do you assess the prowess and record of the main warriors on the enemy side? How do you measure our own warriors? Please tell me to what extent we are superior to them'. Bhishma gave a detailed assessment of all the warriors on the two sides, but did not mention Karna's name. What made matters worse was that Karna was right there. Duryodhana reminded his grand-father that he had forgotten to discuss one of their greatest warriors, Karna. Bhishma replied, 'I divide chariot-warriors into three grades - Rathi or chariot-warrior, Atirathi or Good chariot-warrior and Maharathi or Supreme chariot-warrior, in the ascending order. In my assessment, this Süta friend of yours, I am afraid, docs not qualify even as an ordinary chariot-warrior or Rathi. At best he is an Ardharathi or Half Chariot-warrior. He boasts more than he performs!"Naturally Maharaja Karna was furious. There was an exchange of acrimonious words. Maharaja Karna accused the grand-father of being a treacherous snake that had sneaked into the great Kuru household, and his loyalty and love were all towards the Pandavas, their enemies. Bhishma countered saying that Karna was no match for Arjuna, and was not even fit to be a charioteer of that Maharathi'. Then Karna declared that it was an insult to his manhood to fight under the leadership of such a despicable commander. He announced categorically that he would not fight but stay out of the war until the old man was deposed from his Supreme Commander's position. Immediately after this declaration, he hurried away to his tent. Maharaja Duryodhana . began to wring his palms in utter helplessness, and then went

personally to placate his friend, but in vain. Karna persisted in his decision, saying, 'Let that old fellow with his unsteady head come down from office, then I swear I shall fight to death in the war or let him come and apologise to me. Even Duryodhana was angry with Karna for referring to grand-father in the first person singular.' But he restrained himself, realising it was no time for bickerings and anger and also because Karna was his bosom-friend...."

Vidura said, "Karna has always been conceited ...", but swallowed the last word. Sanjaya noted this. Well, it was no secret that the two most respected persons in the entire Süta community were Vidura himself and Karna. Just as Vidura was held in the highest esteem when matters of Dharma, conduct and justice, were raised, Karna was held in the highest esteem in matters of warring skill and valour. The entire Süta community prided itself on possessing two such leaders. They indicated this by calling Vidura as uncle and Karna as Maharaja. It was also common knowledge among them that the two did not take to each other, but this did not come in the way of their respecting them both equally. Sanjaya understood that his uncle had swallowed the last letter because he . knew that younger persons like himself were drawn more towards Karna than Vidura. Sanjaya said, "I shall rest for tomorrow and then leave for the front day after tomorrow morning." Then he rode away.

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Chapter

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THEY were all sleeping at home warmly covered with blankets, the windows and doors closed. Vidura, sleeping on the terrace overlooking the river, listened to the swishing of the silent river,almost incessantly. For the last fifteen to twenty years, he had suffered quite a few sleepless nights, keeping awake till dawn.

Sometimes when he did get sleep, he would abruptly sit up at mid-night, and be tormented by insomnia till dawn. Though by dawn he felt like sleeping, he couldn't do so because of the chirping of dawn birds, the noise and bustle created by cows, calves, sons, grand-children. Vidura thought, "Now what would the time be?" He felt like going out to watch the stars, but the very thought of getting up in that cold put him off. He remembered the harsh words of Dhritarashtra. He had said, "If you do not wish to share the joy with me, do not come here to see me." He reviewed the situation within himself, "Well, this is not all that sharply hurting. He had spoken to me worse things countless times in the past. He has decided that I am a pro-Pandava person. Never as a partisan of justice and Dharma. Well, Gandhari said I would go home and tell my wife weeping about Pandava setbacks in the war. Why should a great lady like her, a great devotee of the husband-worship cult, who had sacrificed so much, behave like an ordinary woman and show jealousy and hatred? And look at Kunti, who is so different. That is why I have natural, friendly relations with her. One can be open with her. When I am depressed, it always cheers me up to share my worries with her. Even from my own wife, Parasavi, I fail to get such support. Yet one must concede that Gandhari is a real goddess. She is a great wife. On hearing that her husband-would-be was blind, she blind-folded herself immediately and came to Hastinavati as a bride who had sacrificed her sight to share the dark world of the blind with her husband. For the last sixty years I have been watching her live like an exemplary wife. But I cannot be friendly with her and receive her sympathetic understanding, as I can with Kunti. She is to be revered and worshipped as an embodiment of ideal womanhood, yes, but friendship, no. But this was the first time she has used such directly harsh words about me. That is what worries me..."He felt as sorrowful as he would have if one half of the image he had

constructed of himself, had collapsed! Some kind of indefinable depression overtook him. Struggling to get over it he stretched his limbs on the bed, and covered himself with the blanket. After a while, sleep possessed him.

But before he could get enough sleep, he woke up. It was a night of silence, unruffled by bird-calls. The drone of the river intensified the feeling of silence. He reflected, "How long has this river been a part of me, an essential element of me! This river reminds me of the Pandavas. When they planned to kill them by burning them in a palace built of lacquer and packed the Pandavas off to Varanavata, I found it disgusting to live near Dhritarashtra and shifted to this lonely spot on the bank of the river, built a house far from the crowds. In those early days, tigers and bears used to roam around the house in the night. Now Hastinavati has grown enormously, and it had been some fifteen years since its citizens had heard the cry of wild animals. It was then that Pandavas were packed off. How inwardly Dhritarashtra fumed with anger when he found that young Dharmaraja, as the heir-apparent, ruled according to Dharma, morality and law, and earned the love and respect of the people. When his son, Duryodhana said, 'Father, if we let things go on like this, the people may demand tomorrow that he should be crowned and put on the throne. That would create endless problems for us. Then we, born as your sons, will be out on the street as beggars.' How quickly the blind old man responded with sympathy! It is only those who face difficulties at an early age that become worldly wise, as in the case of Dhritarashtra and Duryodhana. The opposite happened to Dharmaraja who became conceited after performing the prestigious Rajasuya successfully at a comparatively early age. And how his arrogance and conceit pushed Dharmaraja to the brink! I recall it now. When I was sent to invite him to the game of dice, I told Dharmaraja, 'Dharmaraja, Dhritarashtra has sent me to invite you to play a game of dice. They will ask Sakuni to play opposite you. Those wretches from Gandhara have nothing else to do but practise dice-rolling till they become experts, and this fellow is a parasite feeding on his sister's generosity. You are bound to lose against him. So, please allow me to go back and tell them that you consider gambling a vice and illegal and, therefore, you are refusing the invitation.' Now what did that fellow swollen with pride say? He answered, 'What would happen to my honour and status, if I, the wealthiest of the rulers in Aryavarta, were to refuse the challenge at a game of dice?' And he then proceeded to his disaster, without heeding my counsel. Well, if they later suffered, they have to blame themselves. Every subsequent event resulted from their own decisions. Why blame Dhritarashtra and Duryodhana for the misfortunes brought about by their own folly and pride? Of course, it does not make Dhritarashtra and Duryodhana any the less wicked, but it does locate the blame

where it belongs." Then suddenly Vidura had the impression that somebody had got up from sleep. He heard the squeaking sound of the front door being opened. He thought that it might be Kunti, and he found that he was right. He heard the sound of steps descending to the river. She was the only person who went down to the river frequently, disregarding day, night, cold and heat. Vidura felt like following her, telling her, about the starting of the war the previous morning. He had the hunch that she was eager to get the news. He got up, covered himself with a blanket, opened the door, and went out. It was dark, but the stars above twinkled clearly. There was a streak of silver in the east. He descended the steps to the river. Kunti who was alone in the dark, sitting on the bank, staring at the water expectantly, now turned her head back.

Kunti who had over-heard the news earlier sighed deeply. Vidura was conscious of the fact that the sound of the river was louder here on the steps than in the house. Kunti spoke, "Arjuna shouldn't have held up the starting of the war by two days like that."

Vidura said, "What really astonishes me is the behaviour of Karna. I had made up my mind years ago that he was an inferior, despicable fellow. But I did not think that he would push his pride to the extent of betraying his master at the time of war or could it be that he has turned yellow?"

Kunti, "How do you mean?"

Vidura, "Right from the start, Duryodhana's evil deeds originated from Karna's counsel. It was he who advised him to drag your daughter-in-law Draupadi into the open court. It was he who advised him to divest her of her royal garb. Duryodhana decided to go to this war, relying on the prowess of his shoulders. Now making as an excuse something Bhishma had said, he..."

Kunti, "Vidura, tell me your frank assessment. Do you believe that Karna is a half chariot-warrior?"

Vidura, "It is likely that Bhishma wanted to cut him to size by attacking his self-conceit. But that is no reason for a servant to act in utter disregard of his master's interest. No doubt, it may promote our welfare. But it is not right from the point of fairness and justice."

Kunti remained silent. Vidura felt embarrassed. He felt that it was less cold down here near the water than in the house. Kunti also was wrapped in a white blanket. It was turning slightly greenish. Vidura wondered why the birds did not chirp. Maybe they were hiding away from the cold in warm nests. The rise and fall of the blanket around Kunti indicated that she was sighing deeply.

Vidura, "Don't you agree with me?"

Kunti, "Vidura, you know that our friendship has ripened to such an extent that you and I can seldom find reason to quarrel. I have never found you demonstrate the childish behaviour of sulking, right from your young age. Weren't you eighteen when I came to Hastinavati as a bride? Therefore, shall I say something bluntly?"

Vidura felt himself caught off his guard. He had never heard Kunti speak to him in this tone. Before he could indicate his agreement or disagreement, she continued, "In your community, you and Karna are the most important persons. You are respected as an expert in Dharma by your community, why your community only, but by everybody. They are also proud that Karna is a great warrior. For you he may have contempt and hostility. Never jealousy. But you are jealous of him. After having spent thirteen and half years in your company and in your house, this is what I have understood."

Vidura felt as if the darkness around him was lashing at him. If any other person had used such words, it wouldn't have ruffled his inner self like this. He felt impotent to counter Kunti's accusation in one breath. Inside the blanket he felt his body sweating. Kunti who was staring intently into the river, after a while, spoke as if to herself, "I have been living on your rice for thirteen and half years. Your generosity to me alienated you from Duryodhana who could not have approved of your extending hospitality to his enemies' mother. If I cause you hurt and pain, I shall be visited by the sin of ingratitude. Yet these words just came out of me, in spite of me. Remember they have sprung from my friendship for you."

This made Vidura even sadder. Kunti's apologetic words pained him further: "Why are you sitting here in the open. Go home and sleep in your warm bed." Kunti got up and walked along the lower bank through the tall elephant grass. But Vidura continued to sit there. He was painfully pierced by the question, "Is my attitude towards Karna one of jealousy?" He thought, "I have myself said that the present war being fought there originated in the feeling of jealousy. I had advised Duryodhana thirteen and half years ago that his jealousy at the progress and prosperity of the Pandavas would eventually result in a terrible blood-bath. I repeated the same suggestion to Dhritarashtra. In the open court I told Karna, 'Karna, your jealousy at Arjuna's superior skill in archery has made you talk like this and wrongly advise your friend Duryodhana to go on the path of war and destruction.' Did not Bhishma then nod in approval, saying, 'How right?' Can a person who can say all this be a victim of jealousy?" Vidura searched his mind with a burning torch, combing its lanes and by-lanes for any evidence of jealousy. But in vain. Now there was more light out there, and the early birds began to chirp and trill. In the water opposite, the winter fog had settled, indicating the arrival of the new season. He opened his toothless mouth and let

the breath out vigorously. As he did it more vigorously, he could see better the winter fog and mist. The action exhausted him and pained his chest and mouth. He had to stop doing it. Meanwhile, his children and grand-children descended the steps one by one. He washed his face, and started to climb up the steps, as his breathing became hard.

His mind turned inward, reflecting, "Yes, the sound of the river water whirling is more audible here than below. How is it I had never noticed it earlier?" In the yellow light of the sun, he walked towards the open plain. He thought, "Yes, jealousy is possible only if there is some strong ambition and aspiration. Some hope to be achieved. Hence it is natural to have jealousy for one's superior. But can it be said that Karna is superior to me? In age, in his knowledge of Dharma, in popularity? Why should I be jealous of him? All right, let me be fair to Karna, and see his strong points. He is an archer, yes. But that was a field I volunteered to abandon. Excepting, of course, what was necessary for self-defence. But has Karna my courage to defy the royal order by calling bluntly the war a violation of Dharma and by not only not participating in it but also by not allowing children or grand-children to do so? But then Karna, too, had had the courage to say that he would not fight under the command of Bhishma. Yet, this was an expression of self-conceit, a stubbornness born of self-obsession, not like mine, a principled act. After all, self-conceit is the root of all sinful and immoral acts. Yes, we can't be compared."

All day long Vidura lay in his bed, wrapped in his blanket. He saw from the window of his bed-room, Kunti sitting on the step below. That was her usual routine, and that was her usual place. Since the decision to go to war came to be known, she had been mostly sitting on the bank of the river. Vidura felt then that she was floating away from him in the water, drifting away from him. Not only did she clearly accuse him of jealousy for Karna, but she even embarrassed him by reminding him of her obligation to him as her feeder for thirteen and half years. Once again the sense of having lost something essential within haunted him. Vidura thought, "Ever since she came to live with me, Duryodhana has been showing utter contempt, regarding me as a lowly person. As for Karna, he had openly declared that I am an ant-hill harbouring the mother of vipers. Well, she said that I am jealous of that fellow!"The idea even angered him. Immediately he remembered that he was supposed to be one who had conquered anger, and attained mental equanimity and tranquillity. He tried to suppress the rising tide of wrath within. He recalled that countless times he had said in the open court that anger was the root of innumerable disasters, and even persons of Bhishma's stature nodded their heads in approval and admiration. Kunti joined the family at the lunch. There was no requirement that one should converse during the meal. She just ate two fists of rice

with indifference. No occasion arose for any talk. While eating he recalled Gandhari saying that he would report the news to Kunti crying loudly. Gandhari's jealously for Kunti was open and visible. He remembered that often he had wished that Gandhari, a great lady otherwise, did not have the defect of jealousy. It would have made her greater. What about Kunti? Vidura recalled that she had been highly jealous of Madri, when she was alive. Though she had sympathy for Madri as a co-sufferer in being yoked to an impotent husband, her fierce jealousy for Madri was burnt away only in Madri's funeral pyre.

He thought, "I am not aware, though I cannot be sure, that later she may have burnt inwardly with jealousy for somebody better off. When Gandhari's son occupied the throne, and her son who had performed Rajasuya had gambled away his kingdom and gone in exile to the forest, didn't Kunti feel even for a day some jealousy for the rival kins?" Vidura found his memory becoming clouded.

In the evening Vidura's health suffered a slight set-back. He felt the discomfort of fever. His body began to shiver mildly. During the night meal, Kunti ate a little indifferently and alone. Afterwards she went close to Vidura and said, "When will be the next news from the war front?" Her asking him eased the tension between the two and he answered, "Sanjaya will be leaving for the front tomorrow morning. He may return day after tomorrow. I shall make enquiries meanwhile with the drivers of the carts that transport provisions, for information." Then Kunti went to sit by the side of Vidura's chronically sick wife, Parasavi. Vidura felt a sort of loneliness. He couldn't sleep well that night. The following day, too, he felt feverish.

The next day, Dhritarashtra's servant-maid arrived to convey the message, "The Maharaja calls you." Without rising from his bed, Vidura said, "I am not doing well. Tell the Maharaja that I am lying down." After two hours she returned and said, "If you cannot walk, you should come in the chariot. If your chariot is not readily available, he will send one from the Palace." After finishing her message, she continued to stand before him. Vidura told her, "I am too weak to sit in the chariot." Then he turned to the other side, facing the wall. He covered himself fully with the blanket. He felt angry but tried to assure himself that he was not. He told himself, "When I tendered him unpalatable advice, how often had not Dhritarashtra called me a son of the servant-maid and asked me not to cross his threshold again? And how often had he not sent for me like this? When I asked him whether it was right on his part to say what he had said, how often had he not asked me to forget it and touched my back? Of course, once a way, he would say, "Why do you call me Maharaja? Am I not your elder brother? Call me your elder brother." But another day, he would say, 'How dare you assume the

intimacy to call me a brother? Simply because you were born to my mother's servant-maid, can you claim such authority and status? If my father through Niyoga had produced a son to a tribal woman, would that boy become my younger brother?' Again, there would be attempts to re-establish brotherly relations, followed by attempts to deny such a link! One must not hobnob with these Ksatriyas. It is best to keep away from them." He heard the sound of the servant-maid leaving for the palace. Suddenly he remembered Kunti. He realised that, after all, she, too, was from a ruling Ksatriya stock. The realisation intensified his anguish.

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Chapter 59

AFTER Vidura's departure, Dhritarashtra and Gandhari slept on the same large cot. But they used separate blankets, separate pillows, so that when they rolled in the bed, they didn't interfere with each other's sleep. He used a larger pillow because he possessed wider shoulders. He always slept, turning towards the wall. Gandhari slept in another part of the cot. He couldn't sleep without a black blanket, and he asked the servant-maid, "You are covering me with a blanket?" He ordered her, "Don't doze off. Pour oil into the wick from time to time, and see it doesn't go off." The servant muttered to herself inaudibly, "What does it matter to a blind fellow whether there is a lamp burning or not?" But, of course, she knew that if the lamp blew out, he would find it from the smell of the lamp. After the servant left the room, he asked his wife, "Did you gauge Vidura's worth?"

Gandhari, "What is there new to see in it?"

The discussion on the topic stopped at that point. He thought she would taunt him by saying, "Yet, knowing all this, it is you who allow him in your company!"She didn't. He couldn't decide whether this was because she was too angry to speak or because her mind had drifted towards some other matter. His mind abandoned thought about Vidura and turned to the wife who was sleeping by the side. He was trying to understand her, re- construct her reality in his own mind. In the agitated state of his mind, he couldn't sleep, and he was keen on talking to somebody. But a wife was difficult to predict, full of vagaries in mood and mode. Vidura was more dependable or rather more amenable to his demands. He would listen to his master with patience, no matter what he spoke. Even when dissenting from him, Vidura would not use such barbed words as she did. But that day, he found Vidura different, and he saw him in a new light. Why did he have to do that? After all, what was new that day that Vidura said? Most of what he said was routine and expected stuff excepting the bitter reference to his being at the beck and call of his master, his readiness to give him company whenever demanded. Dhritarashtra asked himself consolingly, 'So why worry?' From the outside, he could still hear the bustle and noise of men doing things and talking.

These were the noises of bullock-carts being fixed and moved, the drivers shouting to the bullocks, the whirring of the wheels, the sound of things being shifted and moved around, the shouting of the workers lifting them. Yes, he could distinctly smell the torches burning. In a way, all this re-assured him when he asked himself, "How can those poor Pandavas manage to supply such provisions on the scale and variety which the Kauravas could handle? Did I say Pandavas? No, I should have said, these sons of Kunti. What can that poor Panchala offer them? Even if he supplied, how could they transport the material over such long distance?" Such thoughts suddenly reminded him of his uncle Bhishma and his legendary prowess. He recalled with pleasure Sanjaya's account and felt he could do a better job at reporting than his father, Gavalgana. He began to savour the delicious taste of Sanjaya's words. Then all of a sudden and without much deliberation on his part, some words flew out of his mouth. He asked Gandhari, "Have you seen uncle Bhishma?"

Gandhari, "Why?"

Dhritarashtra, "It seems he is a tall, powerfully built figure. Even now at this advanced age, he is supposed to stand like the peak of a high mountain. Have you ever seen the mountain peaks?"

Gandhari, "Well, don't I hail from a mountainous country? In fact, I have no idea of plain, level land. I know only of mountains, covered with green trees, creepers, plants, and bushes. And, of course, crowning them all, the peaks."

Dhritarashtra, "Is this Kuru land of ours all plain, level ground?"

Gandhari, "So they say. I haven't seen it."

Dhritarashtra, "That means..."He was trying to weave an item he knew about into the web of his consciousness, and Gandhari intervened, "You know that as soon as my father decided to marry me off to you, I blind-folded myself. I have set my eyes only on my own home-land of Gandhara."

Dhritarashtra, "That means you have not seen uncle."

Gandhari, "How could I ? Your uncle had not come to Gandhara, asking for my hand for his nephew. Your people had sent only cartloads of ornaments, metal utensils, grain grown on the plains, soldiers and their commander. How could you remember the details?"

By that time Dhritarashtra's mind came to be filled with sentiments of devotion. His pride and reverence for a wife like Gandhari enhanced, as he recalled her sacrifice for the sake of her husband and in celebration of her devotion to her husband, as she blind-

folded herself in order to deny herself what was denied to her husband from birth, and then came to be worshipped as a goddess not only among the Kurus but in the whole of Aryavarta. He felt gratitude to her. He stretched his left hand towards her, lying next to her. As his fingers touched the blanket, he found the blanket rough to feel, but he couldn't say whether it was a black or a white blanket. She asked him, "What is it?"

Dhritarashtra, "Great lady, you are a goddess who came into this Kuru lineage as its saviour." Such emotionally charged words did not evoke any response from her. He, too, became silent. He felt frustrated that he could not know her colour by mere touching. He had heard that her complexion was pure red and fair. That was the normal complexion of the people inhabiting the mountainous regions. He could feel the softness of her skin, the solidity and strength of her body, and it was impossible to feel the colour through touch. This led him to speculate — "Suppose the servant had covered me with a white blanket, saying it was black and cheated me? As Gandhari, too, cannot see, there is none there to clear my suspicion. Suppose all the servant maids had conspired to cheat us? Well, it is a warm blanket, and it must be black. But they, too, must be afraid of being found out and punished." The last thought gave him some consolation.

Then he said, "It was uncle Bhishma who saved this Kuru lineage. Even now at this age, he is the one who is saving us by demonstrating his great prowess and valour."

Gandhari was silent. He was hoping she would say something in support of his statement, and felt disappointed. He asked, "Don't you think so?" She just said "Yes ". Then she turned left, her back towards him. He sensed this through the sound of the blanket shifting and the fact that her breathing now sounded from a different distance. He took it that she wanted to sleep, and lay silent. He was somewhat unhappy that on this day when the war had begun she could sleep so early. He also tried to sleep, lying on his back and covered with the blanket. It was his habit, no matter how much he tossed, to return to this position at the time of sleeping. He recalled the words of Sanjaya and felt jubilant. But all of a sudden he remembered the Pandava army. It was said that their supporters, though few in number were strong in their warring resources. Dhrishtadyumna was supposed to be an experienced warrior and a capable leader. Krishna was, of course, a master strategist. Satyaki was a warrior. It seemed that Bhima's son had also joined the side. And Bhima himself had the reputation of being so strong that he could smash a chariot to pieces, and throw the parts at the enemies. He was almost a Raksasa in his physical strength and violent behaviour. Arjuna's archery, the skill and valour of Nakula and Sahadeva, and the five sons of Draupadi.

The old man was gnawed by the doubt that things were not going to be as easy for them as suggested by Sanjaya! Such doubts led to anguish. Then he asked himself, "When even I at eighty find myself physically weak and easily tired, can uncle Bhishma who is one hundred and twenty, my grandfather's age, be regarded as capable of fighting a war, let alone leading it? Did Sanjaya tell lies to please me?" At the same time, another part of his mind wanted to believe Sanjaya and accept his words as true. He reflected, "I am a house-holder, with a healthy and strong wife, and a whole crowd of servant-maids. But how can a life-long celibate like Bhishma suffer the strains of old age?" This thought comforted him. He began to praise Bhishma as a great personage and as tall as the tallest mountain peak. Just then sleep gradually swallowed him.

Was it just dozing or real sleep? He couldn't really say. He suddenly awoke fully when he heard Gandhari snoring loudly. He put forth his left hand to reach her, and felt that she was lying on her back. That was why she was snoring, he guessed. Then he shook her mildly and advised her to sleep on her side. She turned to one side, still in deep sleep. Her breathing from teeth-less mouth maintained the same rhythm. He felt angry with her. He remembered his experience that when sleep is interrupted one would find it hard to regain it and this increased his anger. He was tempted to wake her up and then bang her for destroying his sleep. But he checked himself, realising that she could retort, "You are getting worked up just because of my snoring. What about your snoring? After all, I don't do it as much or as often as you !"His problem remained, the problem of being awake and alone with none to talk to.

After a while, Dhritarashtra felt the urge to urinate. He knew that it was part of the worry of being sleepless. He shouted for the servant-maid. The servant arrived. He heard Gandhari's breath now taking on a more rapid rhythm. As he walked with the maid, he found the floor very cold. He thought the lamp might be burning, but there was no way he could be sure about it. But the fact that she could take him so easily with her indicated that the lamp must be burning and casting its light. After going out, she instructed him to proceed to a flat stone slab on which he could sit to relieve himself. After finishing, he stood up. She came with a vessel full of water. She poured water on his feet, and then wiped them dry. While walking back, he asked, "You there, what is your name?" She didn't answer. He said, "You there, you servant-maid, I am asking you."

She said, "Charu."

He, "That is a good name. How old are you?"

She was again silent. He repeated the question. She answered, "Sixty-five."

He, ‘Is that so? When one touches and feels the softness of your palm, you feel like just around sixteen." He stood there for a moment. She, too, stood still. Then he spoke, "What is to be done? I am fully invaded by old age." Even now she remained silent. The feel of her hold on his hand remained the same. Then he continued, "You said your name is Charu? Am I the only person to be totally engulfed by old age at eighty one or is it the case with every man?"

Even then Charu remained silent. He repeated the question and said, "Please answer." Then she replied, "How should I know it, Maharaja? You must ascertain it from a man as old as you. You should not stand in the cold like this. Please go back to the warmth of your bed and sleep." Then she walked fast, almost pushing her master.

When he returned to the bed, Gandhari was snoring again. After she put him to bed and covered him with a blanket, Charu left. He heard her steps moving away. Now he also heard the jingle of the ankle-bell she must be wearing, which he had not noticed earlier. He felt comfortably warm inside the blanket. He now felt certain that it must be a black blanket. There was deep silence beyond the environs of the palace. Had they finished transporting all provisions or had they just called it a day and gone back to sleep? Once again he asked himself the re-assuring question, "How can those sons of Kunti manage to acquire so many provisions for the war?" Then he covered himself fully with the blanket. He just left a small opening so that outside air could get inside. It was all warm inside. He thought back, "What did she say? Yes, that I should ascertain the answer from any man of my own age. Whom should I ask? I can’t find even one suitable name. Uncle Bhishma is a Brahmacãri. How can he understand such matters? Moreover I cannot discuss such delicate, personal matters with him. Drona is old, but he is not so intimate a friend as to be taken into confidence in such matters. As for that poor old Brahmin Kripa, he is so abject and servile that he addresses me only from the other side of the threshold! There is no doubt that the only man with whom I can talk freely about such matters is Vidura. But even with him it is not possible to discuss such matters. I recall his giving me a commentary on Dharma, saying that even householders must live like Brahmacãris, and that even when one had sex with one’s wife, one could still remain a Brahmacãri’. And who else is there to discuss this matter with me? Maybe I should send for the charioteer or his father or some old man for discussing it. But it wouldn’t be all right for me, a Maharaja, to do so, with servants, totally friendless..."It surprised him that he had no intimate friend with whom he could discuss delicate, personal matters. It also made him sad. Gandhari continued to snore. He now realised: "It is not enough to have a wife. One must have a friend, an intimate friend, a confidante, to share one’s innermost secrets and sorrows. A friend

who can listen to you and see your point and advise you in your interest." Once again it surprised him that he had no such friend. Then he went back into his warm blanket. Inside its warmth, he was al! alone. He was also surprised that such thoughts had never crossed his mind till now. Not such sentiments either. For a long time, he couldn't sleep.

When he got up in the morning, he guessed that the sun had been up above the bustling, waking city for about two hours. The servant-maid confirmed his guess. He could tell from her voice that she was Susmite. He learnt that Charu, after her night service, had gone home to take rest. Susmite helped him wash his face, bathe, and wear clean dress. Then she took him to the cot and made him sit on it. He immediately sensed that Gandhari was sitting next to him. Susmite left them alone. There was utter silence inside the chamber. The surroundings of the palace, too, were silent. Not just silence, but a sense of emptiness, nothingness. After a while, Susmite returned. She told the Maharaja, "The priest has started the ritual worship of fire. Shall we go?" Both Dhritarashtra and Gandhari got up. The servant took them to the ritual hearth, holding their hands. The hearth was in a chamber in the court-yard. After they fed the fire with the corn, and offered the ritual water given by the priest, they were taken back by the servant to their room. When they sat on the couch, he asked his wife, "The other palaces are absolutely quiet. It appeared we two were the only persons present in the ritual chamber."

Gandhari, "Daughters-in-law, and wives of grand-children, left for the war camp yesterday."

Dhritarashtra, "Why should they go to the front? Are there no servant-maids to go?"

Gandhari, "Are they blind-folded like me to surrender their men to servant-maids?"

He was not sure of the precise meaning of her words. But he detected displeasure in her tone. He did not feel like probing for further clarification. Meanwhile, Susmite arrived to take the royal couple for their morning meal.

The whole day Dhritarashtra was tormented by a sense of utter emptiness in his mind. As the evening arrived, he felt like going round the other yard of the palace. He shouted for a servant. Nobody was available. Then he shouted twice and clapped. Then he felt that the servant who came was Charu. He asked her, "Where had you gone?" She replied, "I was with the queen." Dhritarashtra asked, "Where is the queen?" She replied, "She is sitting out in the early sun conversing with a servant-maid."

Dhritarashtra, "On what topic?"

Charu, "It is something about her girlhood. The Gandhara land is full of hills and mountains. They are high lands covered with green growth. Cool. Then she said that this land is hot for seven to eight months in a year. Pierced by the memory of the coolness of her country, beyond her reach in this hot land, she broke down and wept."

Hearing this, he felt uneasy within. After she came to Hastinavati as a bride, Gandhari had never visited even once her native land. She herself had shrugged off the idea of visiting her natal home, saying, "If I go there, whom am I going to see with these blind-folded eyes of mine? In any case, my brothers visit me here."

He told Charu, "Charu, please take me round in the sun for a while. But not where the queen is sitting."

The early sun felt mild and comforting. The whole town was silent with no activity to be heard or seen. The work of transporting the material and provisions to the front must have been over. All the palaces were empty, with their inmates away at the front. The men had gone to fight, and the women had gone to give company to their men. Dhritarashtra said to himself that he would ask them not to go. Maybe they have gone to enjoy the entertainment that is war. To enjoy the fun of watching their husbands destroying the enemies with valour. How does a war look?" Dhritarashtra went on to reflect. Then he asked the servant, "Charu, have you witnessed any war?"

Charu, "No. I just look after the husband who has gone to the war."

Dhritarashtra, "How old is he?"

Charu, "Twenty..."Then she bit her tongue, and felt it.

Dhritarashtra, "Tell me the truth." She was silent. When he forced her for an answer, she said, "Twenty-six."

Dhritarashtra, "Then what is your real age? You lied to me in the night when you said it was sixty-five ".

She was silent again. She simply walked him around by holding his arm. Then she spoke of her own accord, "Your children and grand-children are young. My husband forbade me from serving in their palaces. But you are old. Besides you are blind. He said he had no objection to my working in your palace. I have been in service here only for a month now. Yesterday when you asked me my age, I had to lie because I could smell the urge in your tone. So I said I was sixty-five."

Though she spoke in a neutral, unemotional and calm tone, Dhritarashtra felt the sense of loss of his virility, and felt like collapsing on the spot. But he stood there stock-still. He was sure he

would have collapsed if she had not held his arm. For a moment or two, his head whirled. Then suddenly he felt the sun burning his body, and began to sweat profusely. He felt like sitting down. But he didn't want to do that as it would give her the impression that he was affected by her words to such an extent. So he merely began to slow down his steps. After some ten steps, his body recovered its balance. He didn't hear the noises of a bustling city, and thought it must be evening. He asked himself, "Have they all gone to the war? Also women? Till now no servant had spoken to me like this. After all a servant-maid is meant for the enjoyment of the king, just like his kingdom. Maybe I should dismiss her from service or perhaps punish her. But what punishment? How should I execute it?" When such thoughts were brewing in his head, he remembered the sweet melody of her voice. He recalled that he had found out her age through this voice, and patted himself on the back for his cleverness and keen observation. After walking another twenty or so steps, he told her, "Take me back and help me lie down on the couch." He asked her, "Are you covering me with a black blanket now?" After making sure of it, he relaxed his limbs and went to sleep.

It was Susmite who was in charge of their night meal and other needs. He asked her, "Oh, you have come. Where is she? What is her name?" She answered, "She is a funny sort of girl. Her husband is away at the front. She said she could not stay alone here. She left abruptly, saying she was going to her father's town."

Dhritarashtra, "What is her father's town?"

Susmite, "I do not know."

Dhritarashtra did not show any further interest in the matter. Not only because Gandhari by his side was awake, but also because he had an uneasy feeling that she had been showing him her contempt since the morning by her silence. There were also the humiliation and anger that the servant-maid had defied him, who was a Maharaja, and gone away. There was silence everywhere. He wondered whether the lamp was burning or not. He did not feel like calling Susmite to ask her whether the lamp was burning or not. Gandhari was not snoring. He grew angry with her because she was, though awake, silent and deliberately making him feel lonely. Then he tried to shut everything out of his mind by covering himself completely with a blanket. But he didn't succeed in it. He asked himself, "When will Sanjaya visit me again to report? Tomorrow or day after tomorrow? Did he visit me yesterday or the day before? I cannot remember things distinctly. Shall I ask Gandhari? But how shall I, when she has been so clearly avoiding me? No hurry. Let me get the good news only after revered Bhishma, rushing at the enemy with his forces, has pulverised the enemy forces. Brahmacãrya is the

secret of his incredible power and strength. I remember something else now all of a sudden. Did Vidura tell me? Or was it someone else? No, it was Vidura who told me. It seems the Pandavas have not touched any woman other than their wife, Draupadi. Only Arjuna has a second wife. It seems Kunti, at the time her sons were learning archery and weaponry, guarded over her sons' sexual chastity like a serpent and saw that they did not go out to sleep with servant-maids. She used to warn them against excessive indulgence in sex, by holding up their father as the case of a person who became incurably sick due to such over-indulgence. Even after they had built their capital, Indraprastha, they never indulged in sex with servant maids. Of course, they gambled and went in exile to the forest. But then exile in the forest was another form of Brahmacãrya'. Then it means that our enemies have five warriors who practise Brahmacãrya like uncle, and hence powerful." This idea made him somewhat depressed and even scared. Then he remembered, "But I did quite the opposite of what Kunti did. What did I do? I used to advice my son, 'Child, we have such a wealthy country. We have here so many servant-maids. Yet if you desire it, spend money and grain to get beautiful servant-maids from other lands, and enjoy them. Why do you needlessly feel jealous of the Pandavas? And let me not be accused of having done injustice to my younger brother's sons.' Now I see that what we used to take pride in earlier days — our wealth and our beautiful servant-maids — have become symbols of our weakness and our fear. Our uncle's is pure and strict Brahmacãrya. It is a tougher one than that of Kunti's sons, as it involves giving up marriage. Well, in that case we have greater strength than the enemy, and we are bound to win on this score." Dhritarashtra struggled hard in his mind to convince himself that their victory over Kunti's sons was certain. After a considerable time, he managed to sleep, and sleep soundly. But all of a sudden he woke up. Was it dream or unconscious muttering? It was not clear. He saw his sons, smashed to pieces one by one in the war! He realised that it was now a mere dream. Not reality. The awareness that it was a mere dream, offered him some comfort. He tossed in his bed. He felt the urge to urinate. But for some reason he did not feel like calling the servant and take her help in doing so. He decided to control the urge and stayed back in bed. That day Gandhari was not snoring. Yet she was asleep. Or was she awake? He was burning with curiosity to know. Then he found it difficult to contain the urine in the bladder, and cursed his old age for his inability to control it. He shouted for the servant. None came. He shouted again. No response. He shouted again, this time louder. Susmite came. Gandhari said, "Why, you are ruining my sleep." Her tone was complaining.

After returning to his bed from urinating, he began to wrestle with the problem of what constituted the secret of the power of

Brahmacãrya. He found that his understanding of the problem and his explanation were not satisfying. He came to the conclusion that Vidura was the best man to consult on such matters. Dhritarashtra thought, "Vidura has not come this whole day. I must send for him tomorrow." Gandhari was sighing deeply. But he was doubtful if she were really sleeping. Suddenly he felt terribly and utterly lonely. He wondered whether Vidura would come to see him or Kunti had poisoned his mind against him. Even in the early pre-dawn hours, he could not sleep, though there was complete silence.

When Susmite returned the second time, he said, "Take a chariot Tell Vidura that his elder brother is seriously ill and that he may not survive if he did not go to him."

After a while, he heard the sound of the chariot returning. He also heard steps coming closer. They were not Susmite's steps only. They were Vidura's too. Vidura was asking anxiously, "What illness?" Dhritarashtra sat up briskly and said, "Come closer." He opened his arms to receive his friend and brother. As he embraced him, Dhritarashtra found Vidura's chest, shoulders and neck very hot. As Vidura saw Dhritarashtra's sightless eyes flow with tears, his own eyes responded by dripping tears.

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Chapter

60

DHRITARASHTRA said to Sanjaya, "It has been three days since you last came to give us the news from the front. We suffer agony here without news. Wasn't it with the expectation that you will bring us daily news that I gave you the gift of two horses?"

Sanjaya said excitedly, "What is the use of running here if there is nothing worth-while to report? Today something worth reporting occurred. From today the real war may start." Wiping his sweat, he turned to the servant-maid and said, "If you can give me some juice to wet my throat, I can speak. Also there is a burning hunger in my belly. Maharaja, have I your permission to sit down and speak?"

Dhritarashtra, "Yes, sit down." He asked the servant-maid to give him a wooden seat." Give him water mixed with honey to drink. Also give him a mixture of corn, honey and milk to quench the fire of hunger in his belly. Tell the cook that Sanjaya will eat here later. Sanjaya, what is the news upto date?" He fired the question rapidly in one breath.

Vidura, sitting on the wooden platform-seat and leaning against the pillar, said, "Speak clearly. As you reported last time."

Sanjaya reported "First the summary of highlights, Bhishma's retirement from the battle. Possibility of Drona taking over the supreme command. Reduction in Duryodhana's army. The masterly strategy of Pandavas. Now for the details. Within two hours of the starting of the fight today, Bhishma declared, I shall not fight any further. I am retiring from my position as Supreme Commander.' He ordered his charioteer to take him back to the tent. But actually he did not go straight to his tent. He had decided to starve unto death under a tree at a place far away from the battle-field, beyond the dust and noise of the war, beyond the stench of dead horses, elephants and soldiers, near the lake from which our camp gets its water supply. He went straight to that place. When the army found itself without its supreme commander, it became scattered and disorderly. Then Karna stepped in and led the fight. At that point I thought I had enough worth-while news to relay and left the front."

Vidura, "Why did revered Bhishma do like this?" When he heard that his uncle who had been a life-long Brahmacãri and an embodiment of manhood, whom he had expected to lead them to certain victory, had behaved in that way, Dhritarashtra felt as if he was struck by an evil star. Gandhari sat stiff and silent like a pillar.

Sanjaya continued, "Remember, I told you earlier that I had deployed our spies in the enemy camp to collect information. Well, based on what they brought and from the spies of Maharaja Duryodhana himself, I was able to piece together the following picture. The Pandavas had calculated that nothing decisive would take place as long as Bhishma was at the helm. They felt that nobody was directly fighting any one of the five Pandavas, because that was the instruction given by their grand-father. And equally, nobody on the Pandava side was prepared to kill any one of their cousins on the opposite side. After all, they had grown together as children and boys, and how can bonds of affection snap so easily? Moreover, it was possible to kill those fighting with bows and arrows, but how could they kill the old commander who stayed in the chariot, sitting on a soft cushioned seat, reclining against a pillow, and was supposed to guide the action in the background? But, of course, they knew that actually the action was directed by the others. When they were worried about such problems, Yadava Krishna, formulated a strategy. You remember that eunuch off-spring of Drupada, Shikhandi, who is believed to be Ambe, the daughter of the king of Kashi, who had died in a fire, re-born to avenge the insult inflicted on her by Bhishma? Krishna is believed to have advised the Pandavas that it was appropriate time today for that creature, neither man nor woman, to lead the Pandava forces and challenge Bhishma. They enthused their men by spreading the myth that Bhishma would be definitely killed today by a being born specially to kill the old warrior..."

Gandhari intervened, "Did you mention Ambe?"

Dhritarashtra filled in the gap in her memory, "You know the story of uncle's legendary prowess. Ambe was older than my mother and Pandu's mother. At the Svayamvara uncle defeated everybody and captured the three girls, bound them and brought them here in his chariot..."He was interrupted by Gandhari who took the opportunity to make a taunting remark on Bhishma. She said, "Of course I have heard that tale of your uncle's habit of interfering in other people's affairs and mismanaging them. I had just forgotten her name only. That is why I intervened in the narration."

Dhritarashtra failed to make anything out of her tone and her being testy with his uncle. But he was not interested in provoking her at the moment. He turned to Sanjaya, "Yes, they enthused their men. What next?"

Vidura answered, "Sanjaya is busy consuming corn and milk."

Sanjaya who was gobbling up food fast couldn't help laughing at Vidura's remark. The food in his mouth came out and scattered on the floor. The sudden laughter made him cough. Even as Vidura advised him, "Eat slowly, slowly, "he began to eat fast and then tried to control his laughter. Then he continued "Unable to contain my curiosity, I saw with my own eyes, from a distance, of course. Shikhandi stood on a high chariot without a covering. From the waist below, dressed like a woman. But from the waist and above, dressed like a man, with armour-plate. Long plaited hair hung over her back. The head-gear of a warrior. Slim- waisted. Shikhandi, fit to be an entertainer in a harem, held a bow in her hand, and an arrow in the other. She addressed revered Bhishma, 'You fellow, you insolence incarnate, you Bhishma. You who captured me as a helpless woman and ruined my life. I have now lost my femaleness and come here as a male to finish you off. If you are a real man, fight me in a straight one-to-one contest, using any weapon of your choice, bow, sword or club. If you have the guts to accept my challenge, touch the ground and salute to indicate your acceptance.' The shouted words of the eunuch spread from person to person, not only among our men but also theirs, and there were loud guffaws everywhere. The laughter continued for a few minutes. For the tense men, it provided a welcome relief and entertainment! The laughter spread from the front rows to the last rows. The whole battle-field rang with laughter. I was close enough to watch Bhishma. Whether he felt humiliated by that mad laughter or whether he really didn't want to fight with a eunuch, or feared that Ambe's ghost would finish him off, after all, the spirits of the dead have greater power than the living, anyway as soon as the laughter ceased, he asked his charioteer, 'Why are they laughing?' He said that he would go and ascertain it, but he, too, laughed, when he returned to explain the cause of the laughter. Meanwhile, another wave of laughter rose. Men on both sides strapped back their bows on their shoulders, and began to clap. Some began to dance, vibrating their waists like Shikhandi. Naturally, can a commander remain quiet when his soldiers abandon discipline? Grand-father's face became grave and harsh. For a few moments he appeared self-absorbed. Then he rose to his great height and said, 'This Bhishma knows no fear. Let everyone know it. But it does not behove Bhishma's great valour and reputation to take seriously the challenge of a eunuch. I retire from the position of the Supreme Commander. Charioteer, turn my chariot back.' Our men became dis-oriented. On the enemy side one could hear men saying that the old bachelor ran away fearing that Shikhandi would marry him! They began to laugh at this. But Arjuna shot five arrows one after another into the sky, attracted the attention of the soldiers, and said loudly, 'None should talk lightly about our most revered grand-father. None

should laugh.' The noise of the soldiers subsided. Only whispers persisted. Anyway, the supreme hero of today's war was a eunuch. Then I followed Bhishma. I heard later that Karna entered the battle-field. Only heard, didn't see myself."

Since he could not remember immediately the different facets and details of the war, Sanjaya became silent as if to signal the end of his narration. He even forgot to finish off the food on the dry-leaf plate. The news of Bhishma's retirement from the war struck terror in Dhritarashtra's heart. He realised that his aunt was re-born only to kill Bhishma. He thought, "What a pity that she was re-born as a child of our enemy Drupada. As if even friends who get angry with us seek the support of our enemies! What does it mean to be a eunuch? Yes, I know it means neither man nor woman. But what does this imply? And I remember now that Dhrishtadyumna had specially worshipped the God of fire to help him kill Drona. What if Shikhandi was set up against him also? Uncle should have remained in the battle-front."

Meanwhile, Vidura asked, "Well, what was exactly accomplished under revered Bhishma's supreme command?"

Sanjaya, "How can I say? Who can count how many thousands of men died in the last ten days of the fighting, how many got wounded with their limbs tom and blood flowing? When an event took place in one place, it is no longer a site of action the next day. Why ? The dead men, the dead horses, the dead elephants, rot and exude terrible stench. Yet it is also not possible to shift the place of action too far away. If we go too far away, it would create problems for transporting material. There is also the risk that if we go in one direction, the enemy can attack us from another. There have been many deaths on the enemy side, too. But, on the whole, we have suffered more deaths. At the start, if we had an advantage in numbers in the proportion of eleven to seven, now we are equal, that is, our seven to their seven. Perhaps it is not at all unlikely that they may have suffered a little less, and have, therefore, a slightly larger force than ours as of now. According to Drona, we are five and they are also five." Dhritarashtra screamed in a voice that carried beyond the room, "Such heavy loss on our side!"He added, "How is that possible when a person like uncle who is as tall as a mountain peak, is on our side?"

Sanjaya, "The Pandavas were able to deal us such a quick blow. More than their attack, the fear of their attack created such commotion and confusion in our camp that many killed each other in the ensuing chaos. It seems quite a sizeable number of our men fled from the field. Many were scared that they were certain to be defeated, as they were led by an old man who is too weak to hold the

bow and shoot! In contrast they believed that Bhima in the enemy camp was a formidable warrior, never fearing for his own life. He feared his own life so little that he would not hesitate to take on enemies single-handed and make mince-meat of them! He never stays at one place, and is all over the place. He has a small troop of death-defying dare-devils numbering five hundred, to follow him to the ends of the earth. They rush at our men with swords and spears. They aim at elephants' foreheads with deadly accuracy and wound them. The wounded elephants turn mad and trample on our soldiers. They cannot be controlled. I need not describe at length the mastery of Arjuna over the art of archery. He can shoot with precision into the small eyes of elephants from a distance. And then, in agony, they rush madly with such fury and speed that no force can withstand them. Ironically, the innumerable elephants we had collected have been turned on us to destroy us!"Remembering something suddenly, Sanjaya paused for a while. Then he added, "In my mind, Bhima and elephant are inextricably associated. Elephant means Bhima and Bhima means elephant. As far as I can count, he has killed and thrown away the bodies of seventeen sons of yours..."

Gandhari interrupted him. She started screaming and shrieking in sorrow. Sanjaya, Vidura and Dhritarashtra became alarmed. The servant ran to her. The cloth-band shutting Gandhari's eyes to the world, was wet and soaked in tears. Sanjaya realised soon the error he had committed. He tried to correct himself immediately, "Great lady, what I said was, he had killed Maharaja's seventeen children. No son of yours is among them. Your sons are secure." Just then the servant poured water from a vessel into a mug, and began to treat her head with cold water. Sanjaya explained the situation to her once again. She understood what had happened, and asked, "Have none of my children been killed? Tell me the truth."

When Sanjaya replied, "Absolutely certainly, "She calmed down.

Sanjaya continued, "The other day, some eight days back, I think, Bhima pounded away eight persons — Sunabha, Adityaketu, Kundadhara, Bahwasi, Mahodara, Aparajita, and Panditaka. Let me see, yes, there should be one more, but I cannot recall now his name. It seems he also did away with nine persons physically crushing them. When was this? Yesterday or the day before, I cannot remember. Their names? Let me see now. Vyudhoraska, Kundalina, Anadhrishti, Kundabheri, Deerghabahu, and, well, I just can't remember. On the way back I was struggling hard to memorise all the names so that I could mention them to you. Now they are slipping from the net of my memory. Yes, I now have got the other names — no, only one, Kanakadhwaja. Well, I promise you that I shall give them as soon as I get them, by running back here, if need be!"

Sanjaya was working hard to get hold of the thread of his memory, and at the same time Dhritarashtra himself was engaged in a similar operation of digging his memory. The old king asked himself, "What names are these? And who had thought of giving them the names? They must be the names of my sons. Or else Sanjaya would not have been so definite about them. Who could be their mothers? Only Sanjaya can make the necessary enquiries and find them out for me. After all, I have never called the servant-maids by their names. Always I used to refer to them as just servant-maids. Only very recently I have started the practice of remembering their names. How long ago did these things take place? How can one remember such old happenings?" Getting out of his self-reflection, he asked Sanjaya, "Sanjaya, how old were these fellows, victims of Bhima?"

Sanjaya, "Well, the first eight I mentioned, I remember. The eldest of them would be fifty. The others would be a year and a half younger in that order than the next. All the eight were children of one mother. They tried to attack Bhima as a group. Their hope and ambition was to kill or imprison Bhima so that their brother Duryodhana would reward them sumptuously. Do you know what happened? Bhima pounded them and made them unconscious. Then he sliced off their heads one by one, and threw them into our army! As our soldiers saw the detached heads dripping blood, they got scared and scattered helter-skelter. They fell upon each other, and the sense of terror spread fast. The nine I mentioned second time were also brothers. Duryodhana had sent them by enthusing them. But even they..."Gandhari interrupted abruptly in a rage, "Whose brothers? Did my son Duryodhana call them really his brothers or are these words creations of yourself a Süta? In the presence of the Maharaja, you should know how to talk with a proper sense of respect."

The lamp on the shelf which had been burning continuously now seemed to grow dimmer. The servant standing at the door poured oil into it, straightening the wick. The lamp seemed to fill the room, not only with dim light, but also silence. Then Vidura spoke, "It is not Sanjaya's imagination. It is a fact. Duryodhana used to boast in the open court. 'The sons of Kunti may be five, but we are one hundred. I myself have ninety-nine brothers in all. Let them come to fight us. We shall smash them and lay them low.' It wouldn't be surprising if he said that on the battle-front. I am sure he used the word, 'brothers', as Sanjaya reports."

Gandhari was silent. The mind of the Maharaja was engaged in an interesting exercise. It was known definitely that Gandhari had given birth to fourteen male and one female children. The sons born to servant-maids, Dhritarashtra calculated, should be one hundred minus fourteen. But immediately he was unable to accomplish the

simple arithmetical operation, and turned to Vidura, "Vidura, how many will remain if you take fourteen out of it?"

Vidura was not able to see the context and purpose of this question, but he gave a quick reply, "Eighty-six."

Dhritarashtra wondered, "How did Duryodhana arrive at the estimate that the number of his brothers born to his father, but not his mother, was exactly eighty-six? Was he sure it is the correct estimate? Perhaps. I do not remember. Maybe he kept count because it was necessary for him. While..."Just then Sanjaya said, "Before coming here, I just passed my house, showed my face to my wife after calling her, and then rushed here. I never got off the horse till I came here. Now I shall go home and sleep. I will rest tomorrow. Then day after tomorrow, no, no, tomorrow itself, I shall go to the front. Now please permit me to leave."

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Chapter

61

HARDLY had he slept for about half an hour, when Dhritarashtra suddenly woke up and shouted for the servant-maid. She was dozing off but immediately ran to him. He heard the sound of her movement. And guessing her presence, he asked, "Why is the lamp not burning?"

Servant, "It is burning, Maharaja."

Dhritarashtra, "You are lying."

Servant, "No, Maharaja, I am not lying. How can I prove it to you? If I want to wake up the queen and request her to check and confirm, she, too, cannot see. There is no other servant here now to cross-check my words."

Maharaja, "Well, I don't get the smell of burning."

Servant, "Master, there is a little smell when a lamp is being lit, and there is plenty of it when the lamp is about to go out. But does it smell when it is burning steadily by itself?"

He realised that she would always get the better of him in any argument, and remained silent. He heard her go away. Was he daydreaming or why did the sleep suddenly go away, he asked himself. Then he turned to the other side. It was absolutely silent. He said to himself that it was always this silent at mid-night. Then he remembered that nobody was there in the palace. None of his children, daughters- in-law, and grand-children, was at home. He was told that no male was there now in the Süta colony, which was behind the palace. He remembered that Vidura had given him this information. It seemed only women were there. In these vast spaces in the complex of palaces, he was left behind, all alone. He thought to himself, "Though I shouted and spoke so loudly, couldn't she, lying so close, wake up? She is not snoring. No sign of the rhythmic rise and fall of her chest, a clear indication of sleeping. Well, stiffly and silently, she has left me so totally alone..."Though his anger was mounting, he didn't want to show it by waking her up and engaging her in an exchange of acrimonious words. When he remembered the argumentative servant-maid, he felt bad. But sleep, he was sure, was

not going to grace him. His mind reverted to reflection, "Sanjaya reported that uncle Bhishma, a Brahmacãri, was defeated by Shikhandi without fighting. Why did revered Bhishma regard it as an insult and humiliation to fight Shikhandi? But how does this Shikhandi look ? I am unable to imagine. It seems, on our side, six out of eleven divisions have perished, leaving only five. They have lost only two. This is terrible news, and I shiver with fear. That fellow Bhima has a loud voice. How loudly he screamed in the gambling court. I never imagined that a human throat could produce such sounds. Why do I feel this uneasy sensation in the pit of my stomach? What did I eat in the morning, after-noon and night? Yes, I can remember. Hard meat, cooked grain only. Nothing else. After all, what meat can a toothless old man eat? Nothing. Only the juice. Therefore, it cannot be a simple stomach pain. And this pain is not confined to the stomach only. I feel it all over the body, in the hands, face, head, everywhere. Well, let me not call that servant-maid. She is a saucy one. Maybe I should lie down on my back and try to sleep. But now that I am doing it, fragments of the dead past torment me as memory. The memory of the seventeen dead children. It comes together, in one sweep. But actually, killed in two batches — eight first and nine later, all having their heads sliced off and thrown into the cauldron of soldiers, as if they were playing balls. That really scares me to death. No this dumb pain is not stomach-ache. It is an acute, undefinable pain..."For a few moments he felt paralysed mentally with fear. He felt as if sleep had overpowered him. He had not paid attention to their names when Sanjaya was reeling them off. But even Sanjaya was fumbling for the names. Dhritarashtra thought, "If even he cannot remember their names clearly or correctly, how can I?" The thought consoled him. But soon it was overshadowed by the acute pain. He wondered whether it was due to excess of some body element. He said to himself, "Maybe I should take a cooling sweet drink or perhaps a herbal paste. If I sent the servant-maid to fetch them, the palace would feel more lonely, more empty. Suppose I sent for the palace physician? But maybe he too, has gone off to the front. I feel even the pain receding. It seems the first eight were brothers, with a common mother. The eldest was fifty. Who could it be? And who was their mother? Could it be Deerghakeshi? Or who else? I just cannot remember names at all. How long ago was it ? Well, when she grew old, she left service and engaged in other kinds of work. Is she alive? If the eldest son is fifty, she must be sixty-six or sixty-seven. Damn it, I can’t remember a thing. I have to make all distinctions and identifications with voices only. Soft voice, deferential voice, weeping voice, taunting voice, provocative voice. Also the feel of their bodies, their height, their size, the tightness of their flesh, the feel for their age, the first yielding of their body, the way they come, falling over each other, full of jealousy. How can one remember all their names? Only one I remember well, and that is

Vishakhe, and her solicitude and love. What a pity her son, Yuyutsu, crossed over to the enemy side. My own son, born to my blood, turning a traitor to me. That wretch will not live in peace. He should have died in the battle. Instead of those seventeen loyal sons of mine." This thought made him sick again, whether because of an excess of some element in the body or because of acute stomach pain. He wondered whether it was vomiting that he was feeling. Before he could make out the cause of his discomfort, the hidden springs of sorrow broke out in full force. When he realised that the discomfort was the outcome of his suppressed sorrow, he felt better and the pain appeared to be decreasing perceptibly. The silence was excruciating, squeezing life out of everything. He thought, but without being sure, that the lamp might be burning. Otherwise would that servant have argued so strongly that it was burning? He said to himself, "Let Sanjaya come. I shall get to know their names and find out whether their mothers are alive or dead. It seems most of the servant-maids die early because of bearing too many children. But Gandhari has not been weakened by bearing fifteen children." Suddenly he got angry with his wife who was sleeping by his side. She had heard him weep loudly, and yet she didn't wake up. Or it could be that she did wake up but pretended to sleep. He cursed her, and then turned to the right. But sleep refused to come. After a little while, he felt the urge to relieve his bladder, and also he felt like emptying his bowels. He shouted for the servant. Even at the very first call, he heard her approaching steps. That meant that she was not sleeping.

When she took him to the spot where he was to relieve himself, he asked her, "Have you spread ash on the spot?" She answered, "I always get it ready."

But Dhritarashtra could not relieve himself. The breeze in the open comforted him. After walking four steps away from the spot, he asked, "Susmite, did you also hear when Sanjaya was reporting to me?"

Susmite, "Yes, a little bit."

Maharaja, "He mentioned in all eight names, names of brothers. It seems Bhima killed them all. Do you remember their names?"

Susmite, "They were Sunabha, Adityaketu, Bahwashi, Kundadhara, Mahodara, Aparajita, Panditaka and Vishalaksha."

Maharaja, "Excellent! You are a very clever one. You could mention all the eight names. Even Sanjaya had forgotten a few in the middle of the list. How did you know them?

Susmite, "Their house is close to mine. And those nine others he mentioned as having been killed? Well, their house is just behind

mine. If you are interested, I can give their names, too."

Maharaja, "What were the names of their mothers?"

Susmite, "Why ask for them now?"

Maharaja, "You know these sons of mine who died. I want to console the mothers who bore them..."She intervened with a loud guffaw. Utterly confused, he turned to her to ask, "Why did you laugh?"

Susmite, "Maharaja, is there any man who can claim to be the exclusive father of children conceived in the wombs of Devala, Patali and Ashwini? My mother used to tell us their story in lucid detail. Moreover, the pregnant servant-maids have a natural tendency to give credit to royal fathers so that the child can attain a higher status. Besides, you are blind. Who knows how many have misused your name how many times. Also they mention a royal father only if the child is male. If a daughter is attributed to a royal father, the royal persons may find no use for her service, and the daughter may have to starve. Shouldn't they prevent such a situation? Had my mother been alive now, she could have given you a correct picture of your progeny, their names and numbers."

Maharaja, "Really?" His hands and legs began to shake.

Yawning, Susmite said, "It is very cold without a blanket. Please, go and sleep."

The bed felt cold like the cold of the night's silence. It took him long even after covering himself with a blanket, to get warm. He made up his mind to install a hearth in a corner of the bed-room because of the cold nights. He became furious with the entire clan of servant-maids. He asked himself, "What did she say to me? What did she say were her names? Devala, Patali and Ashwini. Worthless whores all." Cursing them did not help much, as it did not reduce his sense of humiliation, brought about on their account. He recalled: Prior to the time when his uncle was worried about finding a bride for him, a blind fellow, and had ultimately managed to marry Gandhari to him, he had never tasted a woman. But later how many servant-maids did he take to bed? How many of them did not take his hand and let it pass over their swollen bellies and tell him, "Maharaja, I have become pregnant by you. Touch this belly carrying your seed." How he used to be ecstatic. He asked himself now, "Can there be a greater bliss in life than to touch the belly one had fructified? Even if what Susmite now reveals is true, the children born to my seed cannot be small. What if some servant maids misused the names of princes in this connection, why should I be tormented by doubts about the truth of my own experience?" Such thoughts brought him some solace. Holding fast to such thoughts, he hoped to sleep. And tried hard to

sleep. After a long effort, he began to doze off and later slept soundly.

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Chapter

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IN the morning, after bathing in hot water, Dhritarashtra went to the ritual chamber. There he instructed that in future they should recite both mornings and evenings the Indra litany and then offer ghee. He offered prayers to the king of god's, Indra, begging him to grant certain victory to his side. After that he retired to his chamber. At the time of the meal, he found Gandhari sullen and silent. He was trying hard to engage her in some conversation, when she shouted for a servant. She said, "Take me out in the sun. It is damp and chilly inside here." Dhritarashtra understood the implied hint. Without saying anything, he lay on the couch, covering himself with a blanket. The thoughts which had been tormenting him in the previous night began to return.

After a brief interval, he heard foot-steps arriving. He identified the person, and said, "Come, come here closer. Isn't it Vidura?" Vidura answered, "T just came to look you up and enquire about your health. Did you sleep well last night?"

Dhritarashtra, "Come closer, right here on the couch. Or would you prefer to talk outside in the sun while walking?"

Vidura, "Come. Let's go out. I shall take you."

The sun's heat was mild and soothing to the mind. Dhritarashtra said, "Brother, do you know what I am thinking now? Well, I am recalling our boyhood when you used to take me with your hand for outing on the bank of the river, outside the town. Shall we go a little more distance?"

Vidura was holding his right arm. Secure in Vidura's company the Maharaja walked freely without fumbling. Vidura asked, "Maharaja, which way shall we go? If we turn left, we shall be moving towards the city, but if we go straight, we shall be reaching the bank of Ganga."

Dhritarashtra, "How often should I chide you for addressing me as Maharaja? After my marriage, I have never set my foot in the city. So, let's go towards the city."

Vidura, "Would it be proper for a king to walk the public streets without his symbols of horse, chariot, umbrella and festoons?"

Dhritarashtra took just one minute to think. Then he said, "Well, I am no longer the occupant of a throne. So let's go to the town."

There was mild dust on the road. It was littered with twigs and other cast-away items. There was also the stench of human waste — urine and excretion. And utter silence.

Maharaja asked, "Vidura, what stench is this? Does nobody clean up things?"

Vidura, "How can cleaning take place if there are no inhabitants in the houses? All the men have gone either to fight in the war or to help in it in some other way. Even the women of this street have been called to join the front. Only children, the sick and the old remain behind in the homes. Even they are to be found rarely, in a house here and in a house there."

Dhritarashtra, "Whose street is this?"

Vidura, "The servant-maids. Their children call it the Süta colony."

He took the Maharaja some three hundred steps into the Süta colony. Then he turned right and after walking for some time turned right again to cover the same distance. Then he turned left for a distance,-and turned left again. The Maharaja asked, puzzled." Vidura, you are taking me forward and backward in the same direction."

Vidura, "In all there are five streets in the Süta colony. On both sides there are small houses and huts. We are now walking in all the streets. Are your legs aching? Shall we return to the palace?"

The Maharaja remembered and asked, "Vidura, remember when I was a little boy, you used to walk me all round the city. If I recall, at that time, this Süta colony didn't exist."

Vidura remembered things that belonged to sixty or sixty-five years ago. And things that happened then in Hastinavati. He explained, "There were people called Sütas then, too. But they did not have a separate colony for themselves. The site of their present colony was then all wild wood, full of trees and plants. And where was at that time even this palace in which you now live? There was a mansion of Bhishma, and then another for your mother. And your mother's residence was the only palace. It was only more recently that several palaces have come, for you and your fourteen sons. You have so many servant-maids at your disposal. And huts for those maids. All built after clearing the wood. As they bore children, this new colony for the Süta community came gradually into existence. It

grew so big that there are now five streets in it. Now the Sütas are the single largest community in Hastinavati."

Here, too, absolute silence reigned except for the steady droning sounds as in the night. If the sun had not been sharp, Dhritarashtra wouldn't have distinguished this time from the night. The silence had swallowed up both day and night. The Maharaja asked, "Has the entire Süta Community gone to war?"

Vidura, "Yes, excepting my own family."

It pained the old king that his own friend was outside the war. In order to obviate it, he said, "I can understand men going to war. Why should women be taken there? Can't they manage without women for four days?"

As if remembering something suddenly, Vidura answered, "You are the best qualified to give an answer! Look, yesterday night I went out with Sanjaya. Let me pass on to you what he told me. It seems the soldier lives in the midst of death. Around him, behind and before and on either side, soldiers are killed by being pierced with a javelin, crushed beneath elephant's feet or caught in fire. He would consider it his great good fortune that he is spared from that fate. Yes, that precious moment's good fortune. He is so filled with the idea of death that if he were to see a woman before him he would seize her like a mad man and tumble her and enjoy her right there and then itself! It seems sexual pleasure gives one the spirit and the courage to forget the brush with death and to fight tomorrow's battle."

Dhritarashtra became self-absorbed; he said "Yes "automatically.

Vidura continued, "It seems they are finding themselves short of women in the front, no matter how many they supply! It seems now even servant-maids earmarked for Ksatriyas are being made available to ordinary soldiers. Those warriors who show great courage and skill in killing enemies in the largest number are accorded special honour every evening. It seems certain that no matter which side wins, all the servant-maids sent up to the front are going to return pregnant at the end of the war. Their wombs are going to produce the future generation. That is because most Ksatriyas and warriors will have been dead by then."

Dhritarashtra was somewhat peeved that Vidura was trying to sermonise. He said to himself, "This fellow Vidura is always like this. He considers himself a great expert in matters concerning Dharma. Well, what should one expect when one gives a dog liberty. But that it misuses it by climbing on to the master's lap." He became terribly angry with Vidura. But he held back his anger, fearing that Vidura would cut off his visits, and he would be condemned to solitude.

As he was moving forward, somebody on a horse's back came fast from the opposite direction. The rider pulled the reins quickly and came to a halt as he saw the Maharaja himself, accompanied by their Süta uncle Vidura. Dhritarashtra asked, "Who are you?"

The rider, "I am an emissary of Maharaja Karna."

Maharaja, "Since when did Karna become a Maharaja?"

The emissary, "We call him that. Maharaja Duryodhana himself has approved this practice."

Maharaja, "Where are you coming from now?"

Emissary, "From the front. To transmit the news to Karna's family. Yesterday, after Bhishma stepped down from the supreme commander's office, Dronacharya was given the office. Maharaja Karna had stuck stubbornly to his position that he would not fight under Bhishma's leadership. Only after Bhishma's exit, that is yesterday, Karna lifted his bow to fight. When he stayed aloof from the fighting, not a single Süta took part in the war. And not a single servant-maid put her heart in the job of enthusing the soldiers and warriors. But once Maharaja Karna entered the scene, our Sütas have been fighting like mad. Do you know how swiftly they are finishing off the enemies? I am rushing off to Maharaja Karna's house to give the news."

x Maharaja, "Where is Karna's house?"

Emissary, "There, in that next street. That building which stands out so prominently. It is a two-storeyed palace."

Vidura did not know that the Sütas had withdrawn from the war in support of Karna. He wondered whether Sanjaya had deliberately withheld this piece of news from him. And, of course, it could not be claimed that Sanjaya did not know about it. It was too important an event to be missed. Vidura slightly trembled at the influence Karna exerted on his community. He asked himself, "Why did Sanjaya conceal it from me? Did he think that I would be jealous of Karna?" That immediately reminded him of the accusation Kunti had made against him earlier. He thought, "My community may accord me respect and honour. But it is Karna who has captured all their love and affection. Maybe it is because I live far away from their colony, on the bank of the river all by myself." The very thought made him shiver as though from a chilly wind.

In the afternoon, Vidura returned home. He was afraid of looking directly into Kunti's face. But it was also difficult to kill time without talking to somebody.

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AFTER they turned left from the lake, stopping the chariot, the charioteer got off the chariot, and holding the hand of tired Bhishma he helped him get down. They sat near the lake on a comfortable spot. The charioteer ran back to the chariot to bring the pillows. After sitting on the pillow, Bhishma decided that he had no further need for the charioteer and he should be sent away. He told him, "Go back." But he stood before the warrior like a dumb person. Suddenly a new idea took shape in his mind. He thought, "How can I, a Ksatriya, die on a bed? Well, I feel ashamed of myself in the presence of my conscience. No, I must go back to the front and fight side by side with the common soldiers and die from any arrow. But no, Karna would be the next supreme commander. How can Igo back to fight under him?" The charioteer was still standing. It took him a minute to find a solution. He asked the charioteer, "Look here, are there arrows in the chariot?"

Charioteer, "For the sake of formality, there are just three arrows. Of different sizes."

Bhishma, "Hurry off with the chariot and return with a full stock of arrows. Any size will do. Now place the bow and the three arrows here, and take away the pillows."

After he sat down, he watched the chariot with his sunken eyes, till it disappeared from his vision. But actually he couldn't see it as the dust was spreading everywhere, dancing everywhere, blocking the chariot from his sight. He reflected, "I had never seen such dust, rising from the earth to the sky, linking the two. But the sky itself is like a cloth woven with vultures! They darkened the sky with their flapping wings as if they were black, rain-bearing clouds! Their shadows fell like a rain of darkness on earth! God knows whether they are led to a battle-field by the smell of decaying and burning flesh of death; Or do their sharp eyes penetrate distances and see the corpses piled up like hills." Then he heard some noise behind. He turned back his head to see two vultures and a dog, just twenty steps away." Well, do they think I am already dead! Or perhaps they scented that I had made up my mind to give up life. Perhaps birds

and animals have an extra sense to see death brewing beneath the surface..."He tried to shoot them away. He stood up and tried hard to drive them away by swinging his arms as if to beat them. They refused to move away, and squatted there without any fear. The two vultures jumped up on the spot, and stared in his direction, bare-necked. The dog too was looking at him, expectant. Finding it difficult to stand, he sat down. He found the metal bow too heavy to hold, too heavy like the burden of his life itself! He felt as if his life was too much of a burden on the bosom of the earth! Then he heard the wings of the vultures whir as they made two leaps. He didn't have the mind to look back or to run away. At a distance, he could see people fill up huge vessels with water and cart them away. He did not feel sure of the location of the camp. He knew it was impossible to keep track of the direction in which the camp was shifting as one after another site became unbearable with the stench of dead and dying flesh, and the sight of animals feeding on it. Bhishma thought, "This fellow, Duryodhana, who used to flatter me and show me obeisance till recently, has now become arrogant and stiff. He has the cheek to tell me to my face, 'Grandpa, the responsibility for the humiliation of defeat always rests on the supreme commander. When all your love and affection flow towards them, how can you bring us victory? 'When did he say this? Was it yesterday or the day before? And these words from a fellow who would fawn on me four times a day, telling me, 'Please consider my situation, for I kept Karna out, trusting your matchless prowess.'..."Bhishma imagined that he heard the vultures leap once again. They were flying away where they could feast on thousands of dead bodies of men, horses and elephants. The old warrior asked himself, "Why should they desire an old fellow who is not yet dead? Never had the grand-fathers and great grand fathers of these vultures witnessed such a wealth of corpses and dead bodies concentrated in one place! Now that all the men are dead they want to pierce me still alive with their beaks." Bhishma recalled the recent events.— Hastinavati and the Kuru linage he built and protected. Their master came one mid-night, woke him up to say. The king has the authority to remove a commander who cannot bring victory and appoint another who is more competent. But I have no desire to bring down your long-standing reputation as an invincible warrior. However I have a duty as a ruler to watch your working at the job and then make my final decision.'

I asked,'What do you expect me to do?'

Duryodhana, 'See that Karna returns to the fray. You must continue to lead with your chariot.'

I said, Well, does it mean that I should go to Karna's tent and ask him to forgive me?'

"This was the order given to me by the throne of the Kuru lineage which I had built up and defended! The sovereignty of a kingdom can order anybody to do anything. You can order teachers, elders and even those who have saved your life, in the name of sovereignty! Yes, I now remember this is winter. No sun. The sky is dark with clouds. Well, the sovereign can order those protecting lives, protecting lineages, and protecting kingdoms. How long can the shrivelled, wrinkled skin of this old body of mine withstand the cold? It is a cold that shrivels the skin further. In the midst of the army, I never used to'feel this, what I feel now against the backdrop of the black clouds, the black clouds descending to the earth in the form of vultures. The winter rain has not yet arrived. Maybe it is waiting for the war to be done with and over, so that later it may fall to wash away its ravages and ruins! After the rain soaks and cleanses the earth, the winds will ha ve their play.

Worse than the cuts of knife-like cold is the stench, that takes one's life out. Does the number of vultures in the world exceed the number of human beings?..."From behind, Bhishma heard the rustle of the vultures' wings. He turned round in his seat. He saw the vultures move closer, but not yet ready to rush as yet fully fed, contented creatures. The dog, too, moved a little closer. It lay down, staring at him. Bhishma opened his mouth to praise it, "Bravo!"It wagged its tail, without rising from its position. Bhishma wondered, "What is the animal up to?" He felt absolutely certain that they wouldn't attack him until life left his body. He thought, "I am the one who took the vow of celibacy for life and then went over to live on the other bank of the river in a hut to plunge into the study of the Vedas. And now I see the vulture flapping its wings squatting where it is. It does not seem to be moving towards me. Then I once again crossed back to the kingdom to save it. After my step-brothers were born out of the weakened semen of an old, sick man, and for such brothers I won lovely, lissom and powerful girls. Yes, I know. Ambe, I was unjust to you. Yes, now I realise that I should have given in to your stubborn demand that I could set right the injustice inflicted by me on you only by marrying you. Maybe had I done that, the story of the Kurus wouldn't have taken this tragic turn. I remained a negative force, a mere defender and protector, not a father with authority to punish. Once the defender has successfully defended it, the throne can destroy its defender and saviour!"His mouth opened of its own accord." Am I laughing?" While he was assailed by doubts about his own action, the dog continued to wag its tail. The cold was severe enough to cut right to the bones of the shrivelled body of the old warrior. The cold came from the nearby lake. He thought, "If this blood had the power of continuously flowing across endless distance like the running waters of a river... But no, it was like the waters of a lake, contained and constricted in a limited space..."He began to

stretch and relax his body to alleviate its ache. Just then he heard the sound of a chariot arriving. He turned left to see. It was a royal chariot, drawn by bedecked white horses. Duryodhana himself was visiting him. Behind the royal chariot, there were three, no, four chariots carrying the body-guards, and the Maharaja got off from the chariot. He saluted Bhishma, and sat close to him. The chariots stood at a distance.

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Chapter

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DURYODHANA, "Grandpa, I learnt that you had decided to make a bed of arrows and lie down on it. Who has your knowledge in this entire Aryavarta, of the proper Ksatriya code of conduct? But please go straight to Hastinavati. In the palace..."Bhishma didn't say anything. He sat still, staring at the vultures. Duryodhana also turned his eyes in that direction. He got up, raised both his hands, clapped and shouted to scare the birds away. They did not respect his efforts. Then he took the bow lying there, and tried to take an arrow to shoot.

The grand-pa opened his mouth, "Don't shoot them."

Duryodhana, "Why not?"

Bhishma, "If you kill them, two, four or ten, God knows how many vultures crowding the sky there, will descend on us. When they come down in a flock there is no force on earth which can stop them."

Duryodhana, "That is why I suggested that you proceed to the palace."

Bhishma, "Hastinavati that I had built up will not survive now. Its fate is sealed whether you win or they win."

Duryodhana, "Yes, you built it I developed it. We are all struggling so hard to see that it will not be ruined."

Bhishma, "If that is the case, then this will be our last opportunity. If I die, there will be none left to talk to the Pandavas, to counsel them. Maybe some other day, some other time, a person may arrive, who can manage to see that your moustache will not kiss the earth and the Pandavas also get justice. My body has no longer any strength as it has been languishing without food and water."

Duryodhana, "I was expecting you to talk like this. One more thing also has occurred to me before I reached here. You wouldn't get angry if I mention it, would you?"

Bhishma, 'T am not Duryodhana to lose my temper easily."

Duryodhana, "You agreed to be our supreme commander, calculating that I can be forced to make peace and compromise if you

led the side in such a way that it lost a significant proportion of its forces. You implemented your plan of having my army decimated to such an extent in the last ten days. Isn't this true?'

Bhishma stared "at him intensely. He found in his grand-son's face the eyes of the vultures crowding the sky. Duryodhana, however, did not flinch his eyes.

Bhishma, "You are a smart fellow. You made shrewd calculations in making me your supreme commander. You spread the news that I was going to lead your forces and succeeded in gaining many supporters with their armies. Then you also calculated that my being at the head of your army would throw the Dharma-abiding Pandavas into utter confusion and that they might refuse to fight us. You also knew that their army was relatively smaller than ours. You thought that all these circumstances will help you to inflict an easy and crushing defeat on them. That was why you prostrated before my feet and begged me to assume the supreme commandership. Am I right?"

Duryodhana turned his eyes away from the old warrior and began to gaze at the lake. Words got stuck in his throat. Fearing that if he remained silent, his grand-father would take it as admission of his charges, he said, "Today Shikhandi did an immense good to you."

Bhishma spoke as if he didn't hear his words, "Let me put the record straight and narrate to you the course of the war til! now. Don't blame your losses, setbacks and defeats in the war on me. Let me make it clear to you that there is nobody, yes, nobody, who is fighting this war as a matter of life and death, fighting for life with life. Of course, you are the only person who is fighting the war in such a frame. But you are a better manager of the war than a warrior. Look at their side. Bhima, for instance. He has no idea of death, and that is why he is not afraid of life. He is moved by the deep and unshakable conviction that if they don't win now there will be no life for them. That is true of the other four, too. Even Dharmaraja, who is not a warrior in the same class as his brothers, is also capable of fighting bravely enough to inspire his soldiers. As for Arjuna, it is well known that he is a most skilful fighter and that he fears nothing more than the humiliation of defeat. Though Nakula and Sahadeva do not say much, they are fed up with their present mode of life. Dhrishtadyumna harbours an old grudge against the Kuru lineage. He has not forgotten the humiliation inflicted on his father by Drona. Add to that his itch to avenge the humiliation heaped upon his sister. These words apply, to the sons of Pandavs, Ghatotkacha and the others. Then this fellow who has come from Dwaraka, Yuyudhana. What is he called? Satyaki, I think. He is said to be most anxious to teach Balarama a lesson for going over to the enemy side, with their

force, that is, to our side. Now, show me even one single person, excepting, of course, you, who harbours such intense sense of hostility and vengefulness."

Duryodhana's eyes continued to be fixed on the vultures squatting at a distance. Then his sight turned slightly inward. He gave a pat answer, "Well, that is exactly why I have made Drona the supreme commander in your place."

Bhishma, "Oh! Did you make Drona your new supreme commander? He had a grudge against the Panchalas. But then he had already avenged it by capturing Drupada and winning half his kingdom. The degree of vengefulness Drupada and Dhrishtadyumna have against Drona is far greater than that of Drona against them. But even if he has, it is against the Panchalas rather than the Pandavas. After all, the Pandavas were also Drona's students. You have also laid him under your obligation as one who has fed him. Tell me, what other option did you have under the present circumstances? If you had chosen your friend Karna, Drona would have certainly withdrawn from the war. Not only Drona, but also Ashwatthama and several other Ksatriya rulers. Who would agree to fight under the command of a Süta? Therefore, admit that you had to choose Drona."

Duryodhana, "You can wear warm clothes and eat well. I shall build a hut for you. Abandon your decision to starve yourself to death so that you are alive to hear how Karna performs in the war."

Bhishma, "Your Karna is a fool. I called him a half Rathi, and I may have been a little unfair to him. He sat sulking, refusing to fight under Bhishma, disregarding-the harm arising from it to his master. Really, if he had genuine anger and revengefulness against the Pandavas, would be have sulked, retiring in his tent for ten days? Could anyone do a thing like that when a war is on? He was just looking for some excuse to avoid the war."

Duryodhana, "Right from the start, you never got along, you and Karna. You never lost an opportunity to provoke him and enrage him. Even now you are indulging in it. Shouldn't he have self-respect?"

Saying, "More important than his master's defeat?" Bhishma paused for a while. Duryodhana found him breathing hard. After recovering, Bhishma said, "What do I gain by arguing with you? I don't want to die while talking. Maybe I shall last for a day. Tonight I shall not even cover myself with a blanket.. If the cold were to intensify, it is likely that I may be finished tonight itself. Let me speak my last words. If, before I die, you are prepared to accept them as your brothers, I am ready to initiate and work out a peaceful

solution. Once I am gone, let me warn you, that no matter how loudly you may scream to the high heavens for peace, you will never get it!"Then he stared hard at Duryodhana's chariots. Yes, he could spot his man standing there. He made sign with his fingers to call him. His charioteer who had gone to fetch his arrows came closer/Bhishma asked him, "Have you brought them?"

Charioteer, "Yes."

Bhishma, "Then prepare my bed of arrows."

Two soldiers, clasping the arrows between their arms, brought them and heaped them. The charioteer arranged them into a bed. Bhishma got up, and then sat on the bed of arrows. His old bones began to ache against the agonising surface of the bed. Then placing his head towards the north, the old warrior stretched himself on his bed of pain, on his back, face skywards. His eyes turned to the limitless sky above.

Duryodhana came closer and stood. Bhishma became aware of it. But he refused to cast his eyes in his direction. He called, "Grandpa." There was no answer. He spoke again, "What sense can be there in your dying like this? Please answer this one question of mine."

Bhishma, "If there is no sense in living, then death cannot be called senseless. I wish I knew a better way to go than by fasting unto death. It is possible to set fire to this bed of arrows and die. One can fall into that lake and die. These are ways of violence against oneself. Someone like you is not capable of dying like this, every moment drifting away from the shores of life to the other shore of death. Please don't engage me in a conversation and tire me further. I intend to do some thinking before the inner breath descends into oblivion." Then the old warrior closed his eyes.

After a while, Bhishma heard the sound of Duryodhana's steps moving away. Then he heard the sound of chariots moving away and vanish into the silence of space. He opened his eyes and merged his sight into the blue black space of the sky. He got tired of the dark clouds. His ideal sky was expected to be white and clean and clear. Or it should be shining blue. He closed his eyes. All of a sudden he was stricken by a sense of guilt arising out of the fact that in the last ten days he had been the cause of the death of so many soldiers. The very thought made him sweat. For a few moments the circulation of his blood seemed to stop. So many had been killed so that the Kuru lineage that he had regarded as his own could be saved. There was an eloquent silence in his head. When he recovered his consciousness, he first remembered Shuka. He felt a pang that he did not see him even once. He wondered why he had developed such liking for him, but soon realised that Shuka was, after all, in terms of

relations, a son to him. He opened his eyes again. It was the same monotonous sky, the same black clouds. He could now see some four or five vultures wheeling in the sky, as if trying to converge on him when the time came. He was well aware that even if the one vulture swooped down on him and pierced him with its beak, it would be his end. For a moment he sweated with fear. He heard the sound of their wings flapping from his right. He turned his head to see. He found the two vultures hopping towards him. They were followed by the dog. He was feeling as if the weight of lakhs of vultures attracted by the last ten days' killings in the war, was crushing his head in the form of these two vultures. Then he suddenly felt that somebody was shooting an arrow. Then he heard the sound of the wings moving away from him. He turned in that direction. He saw a soldier shooting arrows at the birds. He motioned with his fingers, asking the soldier to come near him. He asked him, "Who are you?"

He replied, "A soldier, sir. The Maharaja has assigned me the task of protecting you against attacks by vultures,dogs and jackals. He said that he would send another soldier to support me during the night. He has ordered me to inform him immediately if you should die. He wants to cremate your dead body with proper rites and not let it be the feast for vultures."

Bhishma was silent for a moment. The vultures high up in the sky were beyond the range of the arrows. He said, "I don't want anybody to keep vigil and protect me. Leave right away."

Soldier, "I cannot go against the royal order."

Bhishma, "Look here. I want to die in peace, undisturbed. Please go."

Soldier, "Grandpa, there is the royal command. If I leave you alone and go, I shall be punished by the Maharaja."

He became silent. His eyes were staring at the sky. He merely heard his words, "If you do not want me to be near you, I shall stay away at a distance, "and he also heard his steps moving away. The sky was now white and clear and clean. The clouds were blue and black, surrounded by the wheeling vultures merging into each other in black rings. His body from the thighs and below suffered numbness. He sat down slowly. Then he stood up, facing the lake. A chilly wind blew from the cold surface of the water. First, he took his head-gear with his right hand and threw it away. After the head-gear rolled four or five feet away, he took off his armour-plate. Then he loosened his waist-band. Then he removed the dhoti which he had donned in the warrior-style and threw it a couple of feet away. He was now left only with the under-garment, and his body began to shiver in the cold. The soldier standing some distance away watched the scene in utter

confusion and amazement. The soldier thought that nobody knew the age of this old man, standing alone in the vulture-ridden space, white-bearded, balding, white-haired, toothless, cave-mouthed. Of course, the soldier had heard that he was the grand-father to the entire Kuru lineage. The soldier asked himself, "Why did he stand there bare-bodied? Did he do so in order to attract the vultures to go for his bare flesh? His body was a blend of yellow and red, swathed in wrinkled skin. There were white old hairs sparsely sticking out from his shrivelled body." The soldier rubbed his eyes and watched the old warrior. He was not sure whether the vulture had taken on the form of the old man or the old man had taken on the shape and form of a vulture! He rubbed his eyes to see better.

He was unable to distinguish between the old man and the vulture. The vultures had long necks, flakes of red flesh stuck to them, and they were moving towards the old man. The soldier was not sure whether he should drive them away with his arrows. The vultures kept on getting closer. Those flying in the sky began to swoop down. One by one, one there, one here, descending regularly. They did not seem anxious as yet to go at their victim. They were surrounding the old man as if he was another vulture being invited to join the flock. The soldier felt really scared. He thought he could shoot at one time one arrow at one vulture. It could well be that the arrow might miss their flesh, deflected by the wings. He shook with fear when he considered the possibility of the birds, enraged by his arrows, going for him in madness. As he was trying to put down his bo w on the ground, he saw the old warrior divest himself of the last piece of cloth on his body. The vultures hopped a few steps further towards him. The soldier thought that the old fellow was out of his senses. He could now see only his naked back. When he had a glimpse of the old man’s face, he became certain that he was mad. He heard the sound of vultures come down past his head. As a wing of a vulture brushed himself with its wing, the soldier felt as if his very life was being blown out. He left the spot in a hurry and moved closer to the lake, from where he turned back to watch the scene of death. He saw the vultures coming from the direction of the site of battles that had taken place a day or two back. They invaded the whole ground, but were settling down peacefully. All around the dying old man, the necks of vultures, their flesh looking reddish and raw, massed, ready to pierce him. In the centre of the vulture crowd, old Bhishma stood, naked without a shred of cloth, both his eyes closed, as if doing some fierce penance. He lifted both his hands towards the sky, as if expecting someone to lift him up to the sky. Was he shouting? Perhaps. The soldier was unable to contain the terror of the weird scene. He ran farther and farther along the bank of the lake, without looking back.

Chapter

65

AS Duryodhana was returning in his chariot, he felt as if the very frame-work of the war was melting away. Before the war started, he had gone round the camp of his army, had climbed a tall tree to survey the whole scene in its totality, and had a clear picture of the situation. Now that picture had turned into a chaos. He had never imagined earlier that he would run into a problem of this sort. He had consolation: wouldn't the enemies also face a similar problem? He asked himself, "Didn't grand-father know how to organise an army of such hitherto unknown massiveness into an effective fighting force?" Perhaps. But he knew that the work had involved more than Bhishma. For instance, it had included the suggestions and counsel of others — Dronacharya, he himself, Ashwatthama, Dussasana, Jayadratha and others. This led him to the disturbing question, "Then, were we all equally ignorant and incompetent?" Perhaps. It was on the second day that the real fighting, the accumulation of corpses, the stench and the invasion of the vultures, started. Or was it on the third day? He thought that they should stage the war next day on a site sufficiently removed from that day's location. From the point of view of movement of provisions and goods, it would help the enemies if they chose a site closer to their camp. Duryodhana thought, "We, on our part, are doing our best to have the battle as far away as possible from their camp. It was their strategy to see that we are far away from the source of water supply. The war-front had scattered and lost focus. We must re-group and re-structure our dispositions, but how?" The chariot was climbing a small mound. Duryodhana was surprised that he had not noticed this elevation while going on the onward journey. He realised that the natural location of water is always on a lower level land. His nose found the stench of the dead and putrefying flesh unbearable. When he turned back, he saw at a distance water sparkling. It must be now half-way to the camp, he thought. They had finished negotiating elevation on both sides of this point. Further down, it was descent for a short stretch. The plain beyond was the battle-field. He heard the horses breathe hard. He ordered, "Pause for a while. Let the horses rest a little." Of course, he too needed some rest. He, too, sighed deeply, surveying the scene around. He was struck by the large size

of the banyan tree to the right. He felt the stench fouler than before because he had just come from where fresh air was available, and the contrast was too sharp to be missed. When he was taking a deep breath, the horse let fall a dung-ball. As if inspired by it, yet another horse dropped dung. Then one after the other, the horses of the other chariots began to drop dung. The animals showed exemplary solidarity in dropping dung in such a collective frenzy! Suddenly' an idea struck him. He got down immediately from the chariot, and told the charioteer." It is not possible to get a clear picture of the battle situation from the ground, and at such close quarters. I shall climb that high branch of the banyan tree, and survey the entire battle-field from a commanding position. You stay here."

Charioteer, "Maharaja, take a good look. Remember there are vultures on the tree. Be careful. They may tear your flesh asunder with their beaks."

Duryodhana, "I keep a sword at my waist."

Charioteer, "All the four of us will climb with you."

It took some time to climb the high branch. It was also hard to breathe. When he sat on the first branch and paused for rest, Duryodhana felt the weight of his fifty-three years. He shouted to the charioteer perching on a branch at the middle level, "Let none of you follow me. Your Maharaja is not the one to be scared by vultures."

Charioteer, "They are vicious vultures, Maharaja."

Maharaja said, "Don't I know it? You get off." After resting for a while, he climbed up to the middle level branch. The sword was hanging from his waist, and he had manoeuvred to make his moves. As he went up, he felt the chilly winds blow. The vultures perching on the top-most branches seemed to feel uneasy at the intrusion, and began to flap their wings in anxiety. He did fear the possibility that the vultures, with their red, bloody throats and long, hard beaks, may maul him, but he also saw how he could slice off their throats with sword, holding on to the branch with one hand, letting their heads fall to the ground to become meat for the soldiers below! As he climbed further up, he saw the chariots shrink in size. He felt glad that even after so many years he had not lost his touch with the art of tree-climbing of his boyhood. This thought reminded him suddenly of Bhima. It was years ago. It wasn't a tree as tall as this one. They were playing the monkey-and-tree game. Duryodhana remembered, "How that glutton made fun of me! Swollen with the arrogance of his own power, he shook the tree with great energy and saw to it that I fell down, humiliated. Then the fellow ran away." He found the soldiers sitting near the chariot, dangling their legs, look like small heaps of cow-dung! They were so small one couldn't even identify them and

count them. He asked himself: "Is the banyan tree near our Hastinavati larger or smaller than this tree? That fellow Arjuna is a conceited cock. Boastful of his ability to shoot accurately at the eyes of a bird on the tree. After he accomplished it, he went round strutting that he is a matchless archer, the best in the world! And our Guru, Dronacharya, did a lot to encourage this arrogance in him. Of course, the truth is that this fellow prostrated on sight before the Guru's feet, and the Guru, flattered, showered his favours on him. I wonder if all Gurus are like this, encouraging sycophancy in their disciples." Then his eyes turned towards the battle-field. The vision was blocked by trees interspersed between. It was difficult to get a clear picture of the scene. Yet it was possible to identify definitely certain spots- He told himself, "Yes, that must be the bush-like cluster of trees there, where we first struck our camp. And there, in the distance, beyond a similar mound, lies our enemy's camp. They do not appear to have shifted their position. Most of the fighting so far has taken place around our own camp. We only have to face the stench of the corpses and the vultures. They come from their direction towards us. Yes, the awful smell hits us straight in our nose. Since the wind blows in our direction, they are spaced the stench of dying, dead and rotting flesh. They also have easy access to the waters of the river where they can bathe in the night and feel refreshed. We must somehow see that the war is taken right into their camp and they too must face the problem of transporting provisions and goods. So far, the story has been: We form a battle order and invite them, and they come at us and inflict damage This has to be reversed.."

Then a sudden idea struck him. He saw there in the distance countless vultures without flapping their wings, going round the dark clouds and merging into them and getting out of them like lightning. He made up his mind to impose on the new supreme commander a specific and time-bound target and not merely enjoy the status. He wanted to tell the new leader that he should accomplish a definite task, "Dronacharya, you need not achieve anything spectacular. Just bring to us Dharmaraja alive as a prisoner. It seems his addiction to dice has not abated yet. Persuade him right here on the battle-field to play a game of dice with us. The stake should be a modest eight years' exile in forest if defeated." Duryodhana congratulated himself on the brilliant idea, expressing his self-satisfaction by pressing his fingers to produce a sound. Disturbed by it, the vultures which were looking in his direction with suspicion and anxiety, began to flap their wings. There were some eight or ten of them forming into a circle to converge. He thought, "Yes, that is how our men encircled that glutton, Bhima, and he would have been taken prisoner, if Arjuna had not intervened to bail him out. They have no respect for the time-honoured codes of

warfare. Yes, now, this moment, I can spot the centre of fighting. Karna has entered the field. Drona is standing there. It appears to be an evenly balanced contest, the armies on both sides equal in size and strength. With Karna's entry, a new courage and spirit has lifted our men." He found his left hand, clasping the branch, aching and he took it away and held the branch with the right hand. While manoeuvring this, his back came to be turned on the battle-front. He had to turn his face back to see what was going on. So he re-adjusted his position to see the battle scene. While doing it, he could see clearly in the space between the branches, the far-away lake. It looked like a sufficiently large one. In spite of so much water having been taken out of it for so many days to fulfill the needs of so many people, it still looked full. His eyes began to search for the spot where his grand-father was lying down on his bed of arrows. The vultures were drifting in the sky. They obstructed his view, blocking the search. They were all over the-place, invading all the space. He, re-constructed his path in imagination and located the spot where his grand-father lay. He was filled with sad thoughts, "He had eaten certainly this morning. The cold is freezing in the night. He has no blanket, no bed-sheet, no tent, to cover his body and protect him against nature. He said he would last for just one day.

He has been disgusted with things. He seems to have forgotten that I who am on the throne, have obligations and duties. I hear even now the sharp and clear voice in which he pronounced our doom, 'After my death, even if you scream to the high heavens, you will get none to help you to make a peace with them.' He was tired, but his voice did not show the slightest trace of it." Then he raised his head to look at the sky. It was the same sky, crowded with dark clouds. For a single terrifying moment, he thought he had lost his support, his hand losing the grip on the branch, and all his nerves were on edge. He knew that if he had fallen down, his body would have been smashed beyond recognition. He saw the horses, now unyoked, grazing grass. The soldiers were lying down, not sitting up, near them. He managed once again to change his position by deftly shifting the grip from the right to the left hand, as before. He began to see the battle-front directly facing him. He thought he had enough of seeing, but there were vultures all around him, staring into him, and the dark sky, and in the centre of it all he was alone clasping the branch! He did not feel like getting down. He reflected, "Maybe grand-father spoke the truth. Everyone of any worth on their side has strong motivation — anger and revengefulness — to fight unto death. On our side, I am the only one. Was Karna a fool in keeping away from active combat for ten days? Or does he not have enough animus and revengefulness? If the war continues in this fashion, all my men will be eating dust, my allies will desert me and run away or get killed, I shall be left alone and helpless. Maybe I should now hurry to workout a peace, with

grand-father taking the lead. But suppose they refuse peace overtures on the ground that they have reduced us to the status of a weak side without any bargaining ability. They may laugh at us, saying ‘Arrogant bastards, let them pay for it!’ Suppose they agree, and I disband my forces and my allies return to their lands, what is the guarantee that they will not later indulge in an invasion of our kingdom from the vantage point of Khandavaprastha or Indraprastha? I learn now, after the disaster of gambling, Bhima does not follow the counsel of Dharmaraja but it is the latter who heeds the advice of the former. Grandfather is blinded by affection. He has no idea of the intricacies and complexities of ordinary politics." By now Duryodhana was getting used to his position, feeling as if it was natural. Fortunately, he could easily rest his dangling feet on a small branch just below.

Faraway, he could see the movement of flaming arrows. That was where the action was taking place. Maybe the arrows could be Karna’s, he thought. It dawned on him suddenly that the responsibility for the entire conduct of the war was his. Duryodhana fell into a mood of introspection, "He had been advised, ‘Grand-child, let us not go to war. My disciple, Maharaja Duryodhana, you regard me as the son of your grand-mother’s servant-maid. Yet, please heed my advice. Let there be no war.’ Well, that was Vidura. But what do these people understand about the business of ruling a kingdom? Have they ever had the experience of ruling a kingdom? When grand-pa was in the saddle, there was none within the palace to challenge his authority. After Dharmaraja was coronated, Dussasana lamented, ‘Elder brother, in future our plight will be worse than that of a Süta[1].’ "When he was getting used to the fate of being powerless, how his ambition blossomed when he thought that the Pandavas had been finished in Varanavata!"And what did my dear brother say? He said, Why should the eldest son be always made the successor to the throne? Why should this vast territory of the Kurus be ruled by only one king? Anyhow we possess the Ahicchaira portion of Panchala. Why not I be crowned ruler of that territory?’ How he argued with me to do that. Inspired by his example, Dussaha, too, began to dream of a crown on his head! Where is the limit to the desire for power and territory?’ "This Duryodhana, however, was fortunate in this matter. Thank God, the Pandavas had not perished in fire. They came home as sons-in-law of Drupadaand carved for themselves their own small kingdom within our territory, in a remote corner. Yes, it is essential to have an external enemy. If there is none in reality, one must create the illusion of having one. Otherwise how can one achieve and maintain political unity within the kingdom? How can one enjoy security of power and position? Yes, we need an enemy to keep us going! Oh! There they go once again flaming arrows. Are they from Karna’s how? From which direction to which direction are they

whizzing fast? In a war, none can stay put in one place, rooted to one spot. As the warriors shift their position, the direction of their weapons, too; shifts. Or do they flow from Arjuna's bow? But Bhima, too, is capable of shooting such arrows..."He expectorated, and spat a little of the phlegm lodged in his throat. His mind turned once again towards memory, but not distinctly. Then it got re-focussed, the picture of the past emerging more vividly, "You Bhima, Arjuna, and stupid Dharmaraja, if you had minded your own business, clearing the woods, cultivating land and building a township, I would have minded my own business, left you alone. Resorting to an open accusation against you that you were trying to gobble up my territory, I would have managed to keep intact my brothers' loyalty to me out of fear of losing the kingdom. Inwardly I would have thanked you fellows as my best friends! But, no, that was not to be. What need did you have to throw your weight around and display your glory with such arrogance? Your record of achievements — Rajasuya, killing of Jarasandha, and what else, upset Dussasana. He came to me and whispered in my ears, 'Elder brother, if we sit passively to watch the enemy grow from strength to strength, would not that be to let our very foundations demolished?' He was in such anguish when he spoke. His commitment to the throne grew stronger. When my younger brothers witnessed the total loyalty of the four Pandava brothers to their eldest brother, Dharmaraja, they also began to show greater obedience to me. One must understand their needs and ambitions, and even meet them to some extent. Otherwise they will develop ambitions antagonistic to us. Even now the hope of setting up his own kingdom and throne has not died in Dussasana's heart. How cleverly he presented his case to me, saying, 'Elder brother, they have anyhow left the kingdom for thirteen years. If Indraprastha is left untended, our borders there would be difficult to protect. So, let me go there and look after it.' And how cleverly I countered him, saying, 'Dear younger brother, they were strutting about, calling it by the fancy name of Indraprasatha. We shall be dealing them a serious blow if we re-convert it into Khandavaprastha. They will then be taught a lesson in humility. Why should you undergo the hardship of being separated from us and stooping so low as to sweep and clean that place?' I clasped him close to my chest and embraced him tightly with such show of brotherly love! How he was discomfited and reduced to silence! Can this Dussasana ever defeat this Duryodhana in the art and skill of politics? I told my brothers, 'Dear younger brothers, the war will break out most definitely at the end of thirteen years.

Their ally, the Panchalas, are already preparing for it. And they have the support of Krishna of the Yadava clan. We must all begin to increase and consolidate our strength. We shall divide our army into thirteen parts. Each one of you should from now on head one unit

each and build up our power.' How cleverly I deployed the others to perform routine tasks like looking after chariots and horses! Of course, Dussasana was a difficult proposition. I knew that if he was kept out of the political field of governing the kingdom, he would take it as a blow to his prestige and pride. How much I had to struggle to maintain a precarious situation — to keep him within my circle and yet to see that he remained outside it! Well, through trial and error and through continuous experience, I mastered the art of keeping him content in the illusion that he was sharing political power with me. And it was job for me!"

A gentle breeze began to blow. It was chilly. Duryodhana sat rooted to the branch of the tree, surveying the battle-field, totally oblivious to the idea of getting down. But in a little while the wind became a little rougher. Not only did the branch he sat on begin to sway, but the leaves began to fall like rain, making noise as they touched the ground. Mostly dried, shrivelled old leaves. He realised that it was a storm. Dust was gathering below. From the direction of the battle-field, the dust, whirling violently, brought all sorts of litter. Hundreds of old, shrivelled leaves began to rain down on the ground from the tree. One vulture which appeared to be looking in his direction flew away swiftly. The rest followed suit. Were they scared of the branches giving way? He, too, got suddenly scared. He thought, "So far, we had made grand-father our supreme commander only in name. We were taking decisions in reality, but in his name. Now our army has been reduced by half. Peace would be impossible if he died. Even now it is not too late. Why not climb down, and initiate peace negotiations by asking grand-father to lead our side in the talks?" He felt as if some heavy burden inside himself had been lifted. He felt that his body no longer oppressed him like a burden. The fact that the branch he was sitting on had not given away, gave him a sense of courage and hope. He climbed down to a bigger branch at the middle level, and then felt that he should sit on the trees for some more time. He thought, "Even if we work out now a peace, Bhima will not give up his oath to smash my thigh, disembowel Dussasana and drink his blood."

But the thought that it was not impossible to restrain him with the help of the elders, consoled Duryodhana a little. The elders could use the bridle of Dharma to control the impetuous Pandavas. It was a momentary consolation. It gave him a sense of calm after the storm. The very next moment, he felt an acute sense of nothingness inside. He asked himself, "What is the point of returning home with peace after having lost half the army?" Even before the question could fully form itself in his mind, his thought began to run on another track." It was inevitable from the point of view of government to create an external enemy. But the enemy first imagined became eventually a reality. Now they have become my real enemies. They breathe

genuine and pure hatred towards me now. Ironically I and my brothers have achieved fraternal unity only on the foundation of this enmity. Now if I break all this with peace and compromise, it would disappoint poor Karna a lot. It would frustrate him to be denied an opportunity to fight and finish off the enemies." The inner sense of emptiness and nothingness began to subside. He felt better. He asked himself, "Would those five brothers have felt the same sense of brotherly solidarity and unity if they were not afraid of me? It seems Kunti used their fear of me as an argument to make them agree to the marriage with one wife. She thought it would promote unity among her sons. It seems on the eve of their departure for the forest as exiles, she advised them to maintain their unity under Dharmaraja's leadership, even if he made mistakes, and not become divided through internal squabbles, as they would then be unable to face the enemy." These thoughts succeeded in restoring his mental equanimity. Just then, his charioteer was calling him from below. Also the other charioteers were shouting something. He could see the chariots, charioteers and the horses dimly and hazily through the screen of dust that was rising from the ground. Then he started to climb down. He slowly disembarked from the tree, his sense of anxiety abating as he descended. Before touching the ground, however, he had moments of fear, trying to jump from the bottom-most branch to the ground. In fact, he sat on the lowest branch for some time, wondering how to negotiate the last stretch of the descent. Well, he knew that was the way of giant trees — easy to climb up and treacherous to climb down! At that time, the charioteer came near the tree and asked, shouting, "You just can't climb down that way-I shall throw towards you the ropes of the reins of two chariots. Tie it to the branch there, and then comedown holding the rope."

By the time, the charioteer completed his statement, his mouth was filled with dust. Duryodhana's eyes, too, were filled with dust, and he found it impossible to open his eye-lids.

Duryodhana shouted back, "Well, after I reach the ground, who will untie the rope?"

Charioteer, "Yes, sir. You are right. We need the ropes for the chariots."

Duryodhana, "I shall jump, no matter what the consequence."

Charioteer, "Maharaja, please, don't. No, no. You will break your limbs." As he shouted these words, more dust got into his mouth.

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Chapter

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ARJUNA screamed from his chariot, "Dhrishtadyumna, you have done what is consistent with your dubious character. Aren't you ashamed of doing it?" Dhrishtadyumna had just finished the grisly act of cutting the head of Drona who had fallen dead on the ground, and then hurling it into the midst of Duryodhana's army. He was surprised at Arjuna's accusation. Arjuna continued, "You need not look at me that way. I knew that you Panchalas are worthless scum,but even I could not imagine that you would stoop so low, to such levels of barbarism. This act of yours, a gross violation of Arya Dharma, cannot be washed away even by performing ten sacrificial rites." However, his words created great confusion in Dhrishtadyumna's mind, because Arjuna's own charioteer, the horse men around him, and even the great warrior Satyaki, were shouting, "Bravo! Bravo!"The entire Pandava army was shouting, "Victory!"Their victory cry scared even the vultures high up. Duryodhana's entire army was lamenting in chorus the death of its supreme commander. They were so scared that they began to run helter-skelter. Dhrishtadyumna failed utterly to comprehend how, in the face of all this jubilation on their side and despair on the enemy's side, Arjuna could express such feelings and sentiments! He, too, was by nature easily provoked to anger, but restrained his tongue because, after all, he had offered his sister in marriage to Arjuna.

But Arjuna did not stop his statement at that point, and continued, "All you were interested in, was avenging your father's humiliation. How could the uncivilized and the half- civilized like you appreciate the value of universally acclaimed Guru like revered Dronacharya? If you had at least one chance to have the privilege of touching the feet of this great preceptor, your life would have been worth-while. Your lineage would have been purified and sanctified. You have the nerve to decapitate such a great man and throw his head to dogs and jackals." Overpowered by his own anger, Arjuna became speechless and began to press his cheeks, covered with unkempt hair. Turning in the direction of Dhrishtadyumna, now paralysed as if struck by an evil planet, Arjuna quickly pulled out an arrow, and shouted, "I shall despatch you to the city of Yama, the God of Death. No, I shall remove your head and throw it into the sea of corpses." His eyes had turned

blood-red.

Yuyudhana shouted, "Arjuna, why are you behaving like this?" As he found Arjuna ready to proceed, without heeding him, Yuyudhana shouted louder "Because you are his brother- in-law, Dhrishtadyumna has not retorted or taken offence. Just as I respect you as our Subhadra's husband, I am urging you and you must listen to me." Then he realised that shouting like this in this noisy situation would only snap his vocal chords and his breathing would become hard, he jumped from his chariot holding an arrow in one hand, and ran towards Arjuna's chariot. Running was difficult because the sword hanging from his waist came in the way. The horse-men around Arjuna's chariot, functioning as his body-guards, cleared the way for Yuyudhana. Standing below, Yuyudhana said, "We were all struggling hard to finish off this Drona. Your elder brother, Dharmaraja, repeatedly asked, 'Satyaki, have you finished Drona?' Then he would entreat Dhrishtadyumna, 'You finish Drona. This job is earmarked for you. You must do it. Given this circumstance, it is a pity you should behave like an epileptic.'..."Arjuna intervened." You Yuyudhana, what do you know about such matters? Shut your mouth."

Yuyudhana did not hesitate to chide Arjuna, apparently moderating his tone, "Arjuna, you are a shameless Ksatriya. You lack the gratitude of even a dog. Tell me, to clear what debt owed to you have we come here to sacrifice our lives and fight even our own Yadava army? You have the cheek to ask me to shut my mouth? Had this Dhrishtadyumna not been there to support you, would you have dared to wage this war? If he had not supplied you with army, chariots, horses, elephants, swords, bows, arrows, food and fought non-stop, and sent his elder brother, could you have defeated Bhishma? Only this night, Dhrishtadyumna's old father, refusing our suggestion that he is too old to fight in a war, died in harness. And Dhrishtadyumna has been fighting like wild fire, without a trace of arrogance that he is the commander of a division, never disregarding our suggestions and counsel. Now if he had served a dog this much, it would have shown its gratitude by licking his feet..."Without realising that he was close to Arjuna, he shouted at the top of his voice. Totally exhausted, Yuyudhana became silent. By this time Dhrishtadyumna had managed to recover his balance. With the sword in his hand, he jumped from his chariot and then came near Yuyudhana. He said, "Satyaki, if this one fellow were to die, my sister will not be widowed. She will have four husbands left. Wait, I shall finish him. You, Arjuna, come down from your chariot and take out your sword. Look, my sword drips Drona's blood still, and I shall blend your blood with his." Then Bhima rushed from behind and confronted Dhrishtadyumna. Restraining him Bhima said, 'T heard some of my men, shout, 'Head has fallen, head!' I made enquiries about the

person to whom the head belonged. Then my charioteer brought back the news that it was Drona's head, and that it had been sliced off by our commander. Knowing you by your banner I came here running to congratulate you. You are indeed your father's true son, born truly to him. Father-in-law needs no further death rite now!"Then Bhima embraced his brother-in-law passionately. The blood oozing from the wounds on Bhima's forehead, cheeks and neck, stained Dhrishtadyumna's crown. Meanwhile, Arjuna jumped from his chariot, taking his sword out. After him, Krishna also jumped from the chariot. He stood between Arjuna and Dhrishtadyumna, now in Bhima's arms. Then Krishna spoke, "Yuyudhana, for the last fourteen days, none of us had had a wink of sleep. In the last two days, none of us was able to close his eyes. We have all become mentally unhinged. Arjuna, now you proceed straight to your tent, and sleep well for some time. Then you can return. Didn't you claim often that you have the capacity to go without sleep for any length of time, without losing control of your limbs, nerves and mind? Well, you, too, need some sleep. Of course, this is no time for sleeping. We have to seize this situation when their supreme commander has died and they are all at sea, to press further our advantage and inflict more damage on them. The time is ripe for causing as many fleeing men as possible to desert the war."

Releasing himself from Bhima's embrace, Dhrishtadyumna asked, "What has happened now, Krishna?"

Krishna, "Nothing has happened really. It is just that Arjuna was afflicted with the fever of Guru-love! Now it has subsided. Dhrishtadyumna, you proceed and rush to the right there. I and Arjuna will go right into the heart of the confused enemy camp and carry out the demolition. Bhima, what was your position?"

Bhima, "Just a little while back, I finished off seven of Dhritarashtra's progeny. I came here just for a moment to embrace brother-in-law. I shall go back to attack the enemy from the rear. Is it all right?"

Krishna, "Don't rush from the rear. Otherwise you will be blocking those attempting to flee back to their lands. There is no point in killing needlessly. It is advisable to finish off the remaining elephants."

Without saying a word, Bhima moved away. Krishna went closer to Yuyudhana, placed a hand on his shoulder, and said, "You proceed straight to the tent. You instruct your sentries not |o wake you up, and then go to sleep. After you wake up, return to the front and fight according to the instructions of your commander, Dhrishtadyumna."

It didn't take Yuyudhana much time to realise that what they all

needed so badly was sleep. Without replying, he went back to his chariot and sat in it. At some distance, he spotted Nakula's chariot. Instructing his men to remain where they were and to continue fighting, he ordered his charioteer to drive near Nakula's chariot. Nakula's men had suffered a blow and were getting scattered. Yet Nakula did not seem disheartened. Yuyudhana suggested that Nakula could use his men, and then drove to his tent. He began to yawn for the first time during the war. The charioteer understood that his master needed sleep badly. He also -felt happy at it. The horses, too, seemed to run with new energy. Yuyudhana turned back for a moment to survey the scene. He thought that the sunlight had turned yellow. He wondered whether the sun had been stricken with some illness or sun-light had become lifeless as if diluted by artificial torch light. Though he watched with eyes fully open, he could not see clearly. He asked the charioteer, "Why is the whole battle-field yellow?"

Charioteer, "For lack of sleep." Then he stopped the chariot.

Yuyudhana did not understand why the chariot was stopped. On that smooth, even and hard surface, the chariot could have moved in any direction without difficulty. But for the need to manoeuvre a little around a few corpses strewn here and there, the chariot could have moved with ease. This was their part of the battle-field, and hence the causalities among the horses and elephants were relatively small. There were virtually no broken chariots. Then he remembered that there had been very little fighting in this part of the battle-field. The charioteer stopped the chariot and cast his eyes around, standing in the chariot. Yuyudhana also looked around. It was a pleasant heat of winter that the yellowish sun was radiating. It was yellow in itself, and not merely because of their sleeplessness, and the sky above was lack-lustre. To the right, a dense crowd of vultures could be seen, and to the left, there were stray birds, here and there. In the far distance, there were some five or six chariots. He asked the charioteer, "What are you looking at?"

Charioteer, "I am unable to determine the direction of the camp. Yesterday we had set out before dawn, in the dim light, and I cannot recollect which direction we took, how many turns, and all directions get mixed up. There, the chariots you see, are they ours? Or enemies'? I should like to go near them and find out whether they are ours or theirs. But..."Then he paused for a while to think, and continued, "Maharaja, yes, this looks like the right direction. Aren't the vultures to our right? That could be the site of yesterday night's battle. But then the vultures do not like fresh corpses which have not yet putrefied. Therefore..."He thought for a while and proceeded, "Maharaja, get ready with your bow and arrows. Let us move closer to those chariots. There is no problem if they are ours. Even if they

are our enemies, there is no guarantee of their first attacking us. Are they fools to attack and get attacked when there is no real battle going on? Yet, it is best to be prepared. Get ready your bow into position. But don't let it appear obvious and let them not get that impression."

After going round for about two hours, they crossed the river in a ferry, along with the chariot. As they reached the entrance to their camp, the sentries recognised them, and opened the doors. In the middle of the circular tents, women were moving or sitting to warm themselves in the sun. They included Subhadra, Draupadi, Abhimanyu's wife Uttara, who was pregnant. Then there were a number of servant-maids whom Yuyudhana could not identify.

Subhadra got up, and asked, "Elder brother, what is the news?"

Yuyudhana, "Drona fell, about two and half hours back. There is a pitched battle going on now."

Subhadra, "Why did you leave the front and come here?"

Yuyudhana, "I needed a little sleep, good sleep. My head is turning because of sleeplessness."

Draupadi got up and asked, "Who killed Drona?" Though there were no tears in her eyes, it was obvious from her face that she was upset. He guessed that she was mourning her father's death during the previous night's battle. Yuyudhana spoke, "Well, your brother Dhrishtadyumna, commanding the army, cut off Drona's head with his sword and hurled it into the sky as if it was a ball!"The dark clouds of sorrow seemed to disappear from her face for a moment, and then passed away like lightning.

Yuyudhana entered his hut. The servant who followed him, offered him a mug of gruel. When he was swallowing quickly the gruel, Draupadi came inside. She asked him, "Did you see where my children were?"

Yuyudhana, "They are fighting from their own chariots, but with Dhrishtadyumna's contingent. They never stray from their uncle's outfit."

Draupadi, "At the time you left, did you see all those five?" Yuyudhana, 'I can't remember clearly. Yet I am sure that they are safe and well. Otherwise I should have heard about it."

Draupadi, "Don't they, too, need sleep?"

Yuyudhana was at a loss to give a reply. He also realised the need for sleep only after Krishna had brought it to his notice. He thought, "Maybe nobody told them to get some sleep. Or perhaps they must have refused to sleep because of their commitment to their own

kingdom, their own war, the defence of their parent's honour and stature." Then he began to drink from the mug. Draupadi left him in silence.

Yuyudhana first slept lightly but soon he seemed to have fallen into a deep slumber. He felt that he was not sure when exactly he went into deep sleep. Some time in the night he was awakened by some sudden commotion. Before he could make out what the commotion was all about, he heard someone push open the door of his hut. An agitated voice was saying, "Yuyudhana, please, hurry up. A big fight has broken between brothers. Please rush and sort out the conflict and patch up the matter." After a while he recognised the voice to be Draupadi's.

As he went out, he saw that Arjuna was shouting at the top of his voice. In the hut opposite to his, there was Dharmaraja. As he entered that hut with Draupadi, he found Dharmaraja lying down on a bed of grass. A lamp was burning. Near by Arjuna was standing, sword in hand, swearing that he would finish off Dharmaraja. Dharmaraja had some minor wounds on his body, caused in the war. Yuyudhana could not believe his eyes. He wondered whether it was a dream or reality. Krishna, an embodiment of patience and tact, was standing close to Arjuna who was shouting at his elder brother, "Can you shoot in a life-time the number of arrows I can in just half an hour? You are a coward who fled the battle-field after receiving one or two small wounds and are lying down here. And you call me a coward? Open your mouth and shout out how many people you have killed in the war so far." Arjuna's voice and emotional temperature rose with every word. He continued, "Now I feel that what Bhima used to say about you during our exile in the forest, was true and just. We respected you and obeyed you as our eldest brother. We gave you headship of the household. You have become conceited and swollen-headed. You used to lord over us, without caring for our opinion or feelings. You brought us to this plight by your weakness for gambling. It was I who broke the fish-contraption to win this Draupadi. Now how dare you humiliate me before the same Draupadi by calling me a coward? What do you think of Karna? No sooner did just one arrow of his touched you than you ran off here to lie down on your bed. Do you think you can kill him without my help?"

Yuyudhana suddenly remembered that Draupadi had brought him there to help reconcile the quarrel between the brothers. But he found that he had no idea of the background and the details of the quarrel. He wanted to intervene because it might enable him to know the details and also to defuse the situation to some extent. So, he addressed Arjuna, "Why are you so furious, Arjuna? Please, let me know the cause for this provocation." He recalled immediately

yesterday's scene which he had directly witnessed, in which Arjuna had made a vitriolic verbal attack on Dhrishtadyumna.

Arjuna did not seem to be remembering yesterday's incident at all. But he turned towards Yuyudhana and answered him, "Yuyudhana, let me narrate what actually took place. If I utter a single lie, let Krishna who has witnessed everything personally, bear me out. If you think I am wrong don't hesitate to say so. This fool lying down there went to tackle Karna tonight. Has he the ability to withstand and counter his arrows? Two of those arrows pierced him, and only causing a wound that bled. Well, he left the front and ran back here to his tent to lie down. Later I ran into Bhima. Most of the time I am worried about this fellow, Dharmaraja. You are aware that revered Drona had sworn to take Dharmaraja prisoner. How can one be sure that Karna also has not taken a similar vow? I was worried that Karna might have vowed it but concealed it from us. My worry was, suppose he succeeds in achieving it! I was worried about the effect it might have on us. Didn't this worry prompt me to stay always close to him? In the war, can we really determine our location at any given point of time or does the developing situation determine it? With anxiety I asked Bhima about him. Bhima told me that some blood was visible on his face and that he had retired to his tent. How does one interpret the news that he was wounded, and had retired? Doesn't it indicate a serious wound or wounds? Which Ksatriya worth his salt retires from the battle unless the body has been fatally wounded? You can see why I was greatly worried about him. Handing over the command of my troop to Nakula, I came here with Krishna. It was quite dark, and while reaching here, we lost our way couple of times. Now what do we see? Look a t him. Can you call this a serious wound? Yes, please take a good look at it." He pointed to the wound on Dharmaraja touching it with the sharp point of his sword. Yuyudhana said, "Some people are shocked at seeing even a single drop of their own blood. Why are you so worked up about it?" While asking the question, he recalled Arjuna's display of anger the previous day against Dhrishtadyumna.

Arjuna answered, "Would I be furious for just this reason? In any case, who says I am furious? Let me tell you the truth. I and Krishna, quite scared, crossed the river and rushed here. The dogs in your camp, barked at us. They tried to attack us in the night. How many wounds have been caused by the arrows on our faces? Have you checked how many wounds are there on your face? When we arrived here, this Maharaja was receiving Draupadi's care and attention, lying down on the bed. Hardly were we here, he asked in one breath, Who has arrived? Arjuna? Has Karna been killed? Has his head been sliced off?' As soon as I said, 'Not yet,' he launched a tirade against me, without waiting for further explanation: 'Now don't speak further. Shut up your mouth. You have run away from the front,

scared of Karna. You should be ashamed of yourself. Your weapon of conceit, Gandiva, is put to shame. You have put to shame our father Pandu's Ksatriya status. From now on, never show your wretched face to me. This is my command.' Now is he right in shouting at me like that, recklessly, abusing me as if I was a dog? Now tell me, should I not first cut off the head of this fool. Bhima is right. We committed a grave mistake in letting him, as our eldest brother, to build up his authority. As Bhima rightly pointed out, had we finished off Jayadratha earlier, disregarding Dharmaraja's advice, he wouldn't have been alive to kill young Abhimanyu. At that time, I heeded this worthless fellow's moral discourse and prevented Bhima from killing Jayadratha. Ami telling the truth or not, Draupadi?" He turned to her, expecting support.

By now Draupadi became confident that Arjuna would not use the sword against Dharmaraja, as words seemed to be slowly displacing deed. A little earlier Yuyudhana had also arrived at the same conclusion. Krishna was watching the scene, unruffled, as if nothing out of the ordinary or alarming was taking place. Dharmaraja, who was lying down on the bed, suddenly got up and sat on the bed. The next moment, he began to beat his chest with both his hands in a melodramatic manner. Then he spoke loudly and self-righteously.

"Arjuna,! am unworthy of your forgiveness. I am wickedness incarnate, a despicable wretch. I am the supreme sinner who put all of you to this plight. If I am killed by your sword, I shall have received the punishment due to me, and in my next birth I may become wiser. Kill me, teach me a lesson by punishing me." Then he started to hiccup, as he prostrated before Arjuna, holding his legs, muttering, "Dear younger brother, I did not know that you had taken so much trouble to enquire about my safety. If you don't believe me, ask Draupadi. I was muttering in sleep last night out of fear of Karna. I was mentally in disarray, afraid that Karna would capture me and hand me over to Duryodhana. Anyhow, nothing now remains of the rules and norms we had agreed to abide by at the start of the war. Everybody has violated every rule. If Karna took a longer detour to cross the river and reach here, I was not sure that our sentries here would be in a position to protect me. It was under the pressure of fear and anxiety that I lost my temper. You are an equal of Indra himself, and how can you be afraid of anything or anybody? When the whole earth trembles at the sound of your supreme weapon, Gandiva..."

Krishna intervened at this juncture, speaking for the first time, "Suppose Karna did capture you and hand you over to Duryodhana, what could the latter do to you? Why should you be so scared? Do you think he will put you to physical torture?"

Dharmaraja, "In yesterday's nightmare, I imagined that, when I was handed over to him, Duryodhana invited me to a game of dice, taunting me and sneering at me, saying if I am a real man, I should play. Well, if he challenged me at the game of dice, what am I to do?"

Krishna, "You must refuse to play."

Dharmaraja, "Can I, as a Ksatriya who has successfully performed the Rajasuya rite, refuse an invitation to play a game of dice? Would it be consistent with Dharma to do so?" As he was asking these questions, his eyes which had turned red with weeping, and their pupils, were a picture of helplessness.

Krishna turned to Arjuna and asked, "What do you say to this?" Arjuna broke down at the sight of his elder brother in such distress and began to cry like a child.

Krishna intervened in a hurry, "What? What has happened now? What are you saying now?" Arjuna answered, "Krishna, I have no right to live on this earth as I have treated my elder brother who has the status of a father, with such lack of respect. Yes, death is the only proper reward for such crime. Look." He raised the sword in his hand towards his throat as if to slice it. Satyaki who was to his right took swift action to restrain Arjuna from doing self-destruction. He took away the sword from his hand. Arjuna, still weeping loudly, said, "I have no memory of having seen my father at all. I have always looked upon our eldest brother as my father. When such a revered person touches my feet because of my behaviour, how can I get rid of the sin accruing from it? Also if the enemies got wind of the fact that we brothers are divided, wouldn't they ridicule us and laugh at us? Yuyudhana, please give me back the sword. I shall put an end to this unworthy and sinful life." His eyes overflowed with tears.

Satyaki was thrown into utter confusion and incomprehension. He was astonished that a man could weep like a child or a woman. He glanced at Draupadi. From the rise and fall of her clothes, as she stood there, her anguished face bent low, he inferred that she must be breathing hard and with pain. For a while none spoke. In the ensuing silence, one could catch faintly noises from the distant battle-field. Was it the trumpeting of the elephants or men shouting in joy and screaming in agony? In the intervals of silence, one could hear the chirping of some birds.

Then Krishna broke the silence, "It has been fifteen days since the war commenced. None of us has slept even a wink. In the last three days, especially, we have never closed our eyes. How can one maintain one's mental equanimity under such physical and mental pressure? Arjuna, Satyaki has managed to get some sleep and got rid of his tiredness somewhat. At least, he has recovered his sanity and

mental balance. So I shall drive Satyaki's chariot and he will lead your troops. You sleep and rest for half a day, Arjuna."

Arjuna, "What did you say Krishna?"

Krishna, "Owing to sleeplessness, your mind has been unhinged and dis-oriented. Sleep well for half a day and then return refreshed to the fray."

Arjuna, "How can you forget that this Arjuna has conquered sleep? I can keep awake without a wink of sleep for another fifteen days at least. Listen now to my vow. I shall not return to the camp and show my face to my elder brother until I have killed Karna. Elder brother, I swear this by your sacred feet." Then he bent down to clasp tightly Dharmaraja's feet. The elder brother pulled his younger brother's head towards his chest and clasped it tightly.

Krishna, as usual, perceiving what others missed, added, "Thank God, you have not set any time-limit to your proposed deed." Yuyudhana immediately grasped the significance of Krishna's words. The two brothers, locked in a warm embrace, missed it. Draupadi stood there, watching.

Krishna dragged Arjuna with his left arm, saying, "Well, let us go now. Let us not give the enemies any rest or peace." Then, turning to Yuyudhana, he said, "If you have finished your resting, perform your morning rituals and then come to the battle-field. Everyone in our camp is in need of some sleep. I learn that Dhrishtadyumna has worked out a scheme by which our soldiers can get a little sleep by turns."

As Yuyudhana went out, covering himself with a blanket, including his head, to clean his bowels, he saw on the plains the winter sun breaking into the mild light of a new day. There was very little sound of the birds. He looked at the battle-field where for the last fifteen days fighting had been carried on. He could not see the vultures in the sky, either because the light was insufficient or because they had gone, overfed with the dead flesh supplied profusely during the last fifteen days. It struck him that on this bank of the river, the stench of dead bodies was relatively less than on the other bank. Suddenly he remembered the sea back home, which he saw every day when he went out in the plains to defecate. He felt some pang at missing the roaring, green waves of the sea at home for God knows how many ages! He said to himself, "Let this damned war be over and soon let me return to my sea and sand." Then he realised that he should add, "That is, if I manage to survive this bloody carnage of war." He thought the important issue was not whether he lived or died but whether the war ended. The sooner, the better. He agreed with Krishna that one should continue relentlessly with the war, even at

the cost of lack of rest, so that it could be finished quicker. He also approved Bhima's approach of fighting to the finish, without rest. Bhima did not worry about the ceremonial and aesthetic aspects of war, in which much value was attached to things like display of the artistry in archery, heroic deeds inviting legendary recitations, the sheer skill, the desire to listen to one's own glorious achievements, thundering vows and promises. Bhima's approach was simplicity itself — rush, hit, smash, and finish off, the faster the better! Yuyudhana reflected on the recent incident between Dharmaraja and Arjuna. He could see a sharp and glaring contrast between the Pandavas he had seen earlier in Upaplavya where he had joined Krishna, and the Pandavas now, engaged in a bitter war. He thought that even the personalities of the Pandavas had undergone qualitative changes under the pressure of warfare. The twins, Nakula, and Sahadeva, were men of few words, but they were steady and firm. Never cowardly. They would withdraw from the front only when they did not want to risk their lives. But immediately after they rested for a while, they would rush back into the fray. They might be slow, but they were dependable and solid. Yuyudhana thought, "Arjuna was a great warrior, to be sure. But I never suspected that he could be emotionally so volatile. And Dharmaraja now appears to be stronger-willed than I had earlier taken him to be. And he was fully conscious of his weakness for gambling. Unlike Arjuna he is not immoderately fond of his own people. It was Dharmaraja who suggested to Dhrishtadyumna that he should kill Bhishma the next day. It was also he who held firmly that it was crucial to their success in war, to kill Drona. Now he is looking forward to the killing of Karna. No doubt, he lacks the natural physical strength and skill in warfare of other brothers... Well, let me see what has been happening since Bhishma retired from the battle. How panicky Dharmaraja got when our spies brought the news that Drona had assured Duryodhana that his first goal was to take Dharmaraja as a prisoner! He instructed Arjuna, 'Arjuna, you must stay close to me always. I wonder what strategy Drona is going to employ to seize me as their prisoner!' How they tried to separate Arjuna and Dharmaraja! They had sent a special troop which challenged and got Arjuna separated from Dharmaraja. For Arjuna it was less important to protect his elder brother's life than to seize yet another opportunity to display his bravery and skill. None on our side, meanwhile, had the skill to tackle Drona's strategic circular formation for seizing Dharmaraja. But poor Abhimanyu, young hero, went into it and got killed. And Arjuna, in sheer bravado without regard for the practical difficulties, vowed to kill the person causing Abhimanyu's death, Jayadratha, before sun-set the next day. Well, I had never really understood the nature and character of Arjuna all these years." Then Yuyudhana sighted vultures wheeling in the sky. He speculated whether they were resting warmly somewhere to

escape the cold of the winter night or they feasted the whole night on the corpses and in the morning emerged to flex their wings. He decided to leave for the front early. He finished his morning ablutions and rites quickly, and found the cold water cut into his skin. His whole body was aching due to the wounds, strains and stresses of the previous day's battle. While fighting, he had no time to notice all this. He felt sorrow at the whole business of war. Then he hung the wet clothes for drying in the sun, ate a hot meal of pancakes, crossed the river, and climbed into his chariot. His charioteer asked, "I have stored pancakes, and a copper pot filled with water, enough for two days. Do you think our stock of arrows will be enough?"

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Chapter

67

SANJAYA began his report to Dhritarashtra with the preliminary statement, "Maharaja, during the ten days of Bhishma's supreme command, no leader died on the enemy side. Only ordinary soldiers whose heads rolled like the heads of sheep and goats for a collective feast. But Drona, during his four and half days' command, has managed to get the heads of a few enemy commanders roll, and he has also managed to get a significant number of causalities among the soldiers also..."

Suddenly intervening, the Maharaja asked, "Who are those leaders whose heads have rolled? First, tell me their names."

Suddenly jolted out of his narrative rhythm, Sanjaya took a moment to recollect the names, and said, "I shall tell you. Wait. Arjuna's son Abhimanyu, Bhima's son Ghatotkacha, Acharya Drona, Sindhu ruler Jayadratha and several allied Kings..."Gandhari screamed at the mention of Jayadratha, "You mean my daughter Dusshale's husband?"

Sanjaya answered in even tone, "Yes, great queen." He was a bit upset by these interruptions to his narrative flow. She asked, "Who killed him?" He replied calmly, "Arjuna killed Jayadratha and thus fulfilled a vow he had taken earlier."

Gandhari, "Let the wife of this fellow who has made my daughter a widow..."Her sorrow turned into cursing. Dhritarashtas's heart also melted. The lamp was burning on the shelf in the ominous silence of the night. Vidura sat leaning against a pillar.

Dhritarashtra, "Vidura, why don't you console her?"

Vidura, "The mind recovers its normal balance after cursing to one's heart's content. That young boy Abhimanyu's wife and Ghatotkacha's wife also have become widows. Wives of countless soldiers killed so far and of allied rulers, have also become widows. The widowhood of these innumerable wives, scattered in several countries, working at household chores, and labouring in the fields, all happening in one war, needs to be worried about. Let us ask why this calamity occurs ".

After listening to Vidura, Gandhari stopped hurling curses. Her red face had turned redder, and both Sanjaya and Vidura noticed it in the light of the lamp. Vidura ordered, "Sanjaya, tell us what happened next ".

Sanjaya continued, "When he was elevated to the position of the supreme commander, Drona's face lighted up with gratitude and contentment. He asked Duryodhana, 'Maharaja, in return for your generosity, how shall I show you my gratitude?' Duryodhana said, 'Nothing much. Just take Dharmaraja as a prisoner and hand him over to me. I promise I shall not kill him. After that I shall decide how to work out a reasonable peace'. Everybody welcomed Maharaja's idea. Wasn't it Maharaja's intention, after the war, to hand over to Dharmaraja his share of the territory? Then Dronacharya told all the commanders on our side, 'Our aim is to take Dharmaraja a prisoner. In order to achieve it I shall work out a strategy of army formation. You should all grasp its secret correctly and then fight. Then he explained to them the details of his strategy. The commanders passed on the relevant details to those under their command, the strategy involved a formation known as cakravyüha or the circle-within-circle formation strategy. They found one problem with it. You see, Drona had taught Arjuna all the tricks and strategies he knew. Hence it was most certain that right from the start Arjuna would manage to attack it without being caught in its trap. It cannot be ruled out out that sharp-witted Krishna, his charioteer, may penetrate the secret of our strategy, and turn our strategy against us! Hence the problem for us was to see that Arjuna and Krishna were kept aloof from the battle scene for some time. What was to be done to achieve this? You know the king of Trigarta, Susharma, and his younger brothers Satyeshu, Satyakarma, Satyadeva and Satyarata. These are very close friends of our Maharaja. The battle was about to commence the next morning, when the eldest of the five, Susharma was to challenge Arjuna, shrewdly calculating his major weakness, self-conceit. He was to shout at Arjuna, 'If you are man enough', come and tackle me in a hand-to-hand combat'. That was the plan. Arjuna would naturally accept the challenge as a matter of honour, and that way he and Krishna would be removed from the site of the battle. None else would be there on the enemy side to counter this strategy. They thought after this it would be absolutely certain that Dharmaraja would be trapped and taken prisoner. They acted accordingly."

Dhritarashtra said enthusiastically, "Bravo! Bravo! Did they carry it out? Tell Duryodhana to produce the prisoner Dharmaraja before me."

Sanjaya, "I am sorry to report that he was not taken prisoner. The plan miscarried because of unforeseen developments. As soon as he heard the challenge of the king of Trigrata, Arjuna went after him,

with his troop. He was sufficiently removed from the scene.

He went to a distant spot to answer the challenge, a spot beyond the scene of broken chariots, splintered arrows and the stench of rotting flesh, beyond the four mounds. Meanwhile, somehow the Pandavas got wind of our new strategy. Dharmaraja stood back, asking his men not to rush into an unknown formation of the enemy force. At the same time, not to have penetrated it would have meant a humiliation in the direct presence of the Ksatriya warriors. They would have made themselves a target of universal ridicule. Nakula, Sahadeva, Yuyudhana, Dhrishtadyumna and other Pandava commanders felt helpless, unable to decide what to do. But Bhima, as usual unruffled, said, "Why should you penetrate the formation in the way our enemies have worked out? Let us not worry about penetrating it. Come, let us rush and smash them." From one side he began to go at our men and began to cause damage. The others stood passively, unable to decide. Then Abhimanyu, Arjuna's son, came forward, and said, T know the strategy of the circle-within-circle formation. Back in Upaplavya my father told me about it in detail by drawing figures on the sand with his fingers. Let me rush into it. Then the rest of you follow me.' Though hardly bigger than a boy, he was very brave and spirited. The way he could send the arrows to make curvaceous movement, showed that none but Arjuna could shoot with similar skill. The accuracy of his aiming was as deadly as his father's. For a moment or two Dharmaraja hesitated to send Abhimanyu, but it was a matter of honour. They decided to place him at the front and follow. It seems the major point of the circle-within-circle strategy is to trap the enemy by making him lose his way, make him a trapped animal unable to escape the hunter's net. Abhimanyu tried to penetrate the formation, and our men allowed him to get in, on purpose. He was sucked into the whirlpool, poor boy. Outside the formation, Dharmaraja was protected by two flanks on either side of him, led by Yuyudhana and Dhrishtadyumna, supported in the rear by Nakula and Sahadeva. Well, that was that. They couldn't get Dharamaraja. But by the afternoon, they were able to smash and finish off Abhimanyu. But one must sing that young boy's heroic exploits. How he hi t back at us and destroyed our men. I am told that he had organised a small brigade of his own, consisting of youth of his own age, even while he was in Upaplavya. They were all cubs, most of them below twenty, and none above it. He had the zeal to rush into any dangerous situation. He had the recklessness of youth, no hesitation before action. They were not worried about the consequences. Their motto: just rush and act. They didn't care for honour, fame and conceited show of skill and heroism. All they were after were action and deed. All these youth rushed towards the formation, led by Abhimanyu. As soon as he saw Jayadratha at the entrance of the formation, Abhimanyu said, 'Are you the scoundrel

who humiliated my senior-mother?' Then he shot one arrow. All the youth shot arrows at the same target. It took Jayadrata a moment to recover his balance. But these youth rushed forward. They managed to mince-meat a king of the Ikshwaku lineage... I forget his name now. The Madra king Salya, who was not fighting with any vigour or spirit, was wounded by an arrow, and immediately collapsed in his chariot. Then proceeding further, they attacked furiously Drona's chariot contingent. They inflicted heavy damage, the chariots were smashed and the horses scattered. When he was told that this was Arjuna's son, Dronacharya stared at the boy for a moment or two and shouted, 'Bravo!' Then he ordered Duryodhana to rush and finish off Abhimanyu... Dussasana was unable to do it. Even Karna was unable to match that young fellow's skill and spirit, and this was incredible. Somehow, instead of fighting, Karna lost himself in gazing at the boy. His accuracy wavered, and he appeared to have been captivated by that boy's looks. But those youth gave a damn. They went about, smashing and slicing and shooting and pounding. Everybody and everything in sight! Their peculiar shouting rented the air. How many of our men fell to them. One of Madra king Salysa's sons died. Countless princes were killed. A king with the name Vrindaraka. Others killed were Ashwaketu, Shatrunjaya, Chandraketu, Meghavega, Suvarcha, Suryabhasa and others whose names I cannot remember. Good God, I had missed the most important item. Yes, Duryodhana's son Lakshana, too, died. Then who else?"

Dhritarashtra screamed madly, "You mean my grand-son Lakshana?"

Sanjaya, totally unaware of the person to whom he was narrating the events of the war, said in a matter of fact tone, "Yes, that is right. Then when the attack of this youth brigade proved to be too much, Shakuni gave an idea, a way out.."

Dhritarashtra shouted, "Sanjaya, stop it, stop it. I don't want to hear your report any further."

Sanjaya suddenly stopped his narration. Dhritarashtra became dumb. Gandhari, lamenting inwardly, was silent. The room was enveloped in the silence of death. The palace was frighteningly quiet. The whole of Hastinavati was in the grip of a menacing silence. The little lamp was burning low. The servant-maid was dozing with her back to the door. After a pause, Sanjaya said, "I shall stop my narration at this point. I feel as if I haven't slept for ages. So I shall go home now. I shall try to get some sleep, but I am not sure if I shall get it in the hurry to run off to gather news. If there is even a day's gap, most of the details will escape memory."

Then Dhritarashtra spoke, "Tell us how that Abhimanyu was killed, and then you can break off your report for the day."

Sanjaya, "Well, Shakuni's suggestion was that we should all converge simultaneously on the boy, and then finish him off. According to him, that was the only way to halt the menace of Abhimanyu. Dronacharya didn't agree. Then Duryodhana said, 'All right, Acharya, you can go and take him on single-handed. I am not prepared to allow any further loss of my men. Moreover I shall have no rest until I see the person who has killed my son, die.' It was then that Maharaja's and Shakuni's suggestion was accepted by Drona. Accordingly, our top warriors like Drona, Karna, king of Koshala — Brihadbala, Kripacharya, Ashwatthama, and Kritavarma, the Yadava commander from Dwaraka, encircled Abhimanyu and his brigade, with their troops. It was in this operation that King of Kosala, Brihadbala, met his death. By then we had killed many members of Abhimanyu's troop. Those who remained were very tired. They had overspent their energy and weapons in the impetuosity natural to their youth. Their arrows, too, had been exhausted. There was not even a single arrow remaining in Abhimanyu's chariot. He was forced to take his sword, with which he rushed into the thick of the fray. The six commanders and their men now aimed their arrows at one target — Abhimanyu swinging his sword in the face of certain death, as if death was none of his concern. You know something special about this event? He was equipped with the armour-plate that belonged to his father, Arjuna. It was a special piece, hard on the neck, arm-pits and back. But no arrow can pierce those parts. It was lined inside with metal foil, and as the arrows hit it, there was a metallic ring. Eventually, they killed him by raining arrows on his face, thighs and knees. The death was the result of a mighty bleeding. Of the other youth, most died. The rest scattered after the fall of their leader. But they were caught in circle-within-circle formation, unable to escape. One by one they bled to death as the arrows rained incessantly on their bodies. Maybe some of them might have preferred to surrender, but they had no chance to do it. The quantity of arrows used was incredible. If they had been collected, they would have provided enough fuel for cremating all the corpses that had been strewn there on the ground that day."

Dhritarashtra sighed deeply. Gandhari loosened her tight lips. Sanjaya's voice was fading out. Silence again. Everybody present seemed to be seeing in the air vivid pictures of the events described by Sanjaya. All dumb pictures. After quite some time, Vidura asked, "At the beginning, you told us that Bhima rushed to one side of the formation. What happened to him? Was the formation upset by his action?"

Sanjaya, "Unfortunately I was unable to gather information about that part of the battle-field. Now I can see clearly what Bhima was up to. It was to comb for Dhritarashtra's sons and then finish them off. It seems that our men were aware of this. As soon as they saw Bhima

and his troop arrive, they just scattered away. Then Bhima rushed in and killed Maharaja's sons. So far he has smashed and finished off thirty-one. Of them, thirteen were from the circle-within-circle formation. Then a group of eight persons including Shatrunjaya, Shatrusaha, Chitrabana, Chitrayudha and so on. And another group of five comprising Durjaya, Durmukha, Durmarshana, Dussaha and Durmada. Then..."

Gandhari screamed again, "Oh God! These five are my own sons." Sanjaya and Vidura turned in her direction. At the end of her scream, she collapsed on the couch with a thud. Dhritarashtra opened his mouth to say "My sons..."but bent low to embrace his wife. He was choked.

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Chapter

68

EVEN as he asked, "My son?" Arjuna's throat began to choke. When he entered his hut and saw Subhadra rolling on the ground, weeping loudly, he had no doubt that it was his son. He collapsed by her side and then embraced her. Her face had turned into putty with tears, as she clasped her husband's thighs. The thick lamp began to sway because the door had been left open. The flame of the lamp stabilised as the arrival of Draupadi, Krishna and Dharmaraja blocked the breeze drifting through the door. They stood around the grief-stricken couple. She was crying out her tears on his shoulders and he was crying his tears on her thighs. Dharmaraja fell into in a daze due to the convulsions of their bodies. Draupadi's eyes were filled with tears. Krishna was standing silently, his face filled with sadness.

Subhadra was accusing while weeping, "Your beloved darling son was sacrificed. It seems your elder brother gave consent to his going to war. In spite your being there, he had to die. Shame on your elder brother. Shame on your skill as an archer. Shame on the power of your arrows. Shame on Bhima's powerful arms. Shame on the entire Pandava lineage." She was pouring tears like a broken pot. Arjuna did not know how to respond to the situation excepting to embrace her more tightly.

After some time he ceased crying and consoled her. Then he went to the next hut where, in the dim light of the lamp, Abhimanyu's young wife, Uttare, was lying on Draupadi's lap, and Draupadi was gently and consolingly passing her palm across Uttare's forehead. She was lying on her back, her belly swollen with the seed of her dead husband. Her sorrow was too great to find any outlet, and there was no outward display of it, everything accumulating within like a sleeping volcano. As she saw her father-in-law Arjuna enter the hut, she pulled back her legs in modesty. Then she managed to sit up, her head bent low. Arjuna said, standing, after a while, "Draupadi there is none who has the power to console, equal to yours." Draupadi kept silent. Because the door had been opened by him to enter, the lamp began to flicker. Arjuna then left.

After getting to know the details in the large hut of Dharmaraja,

Arjuna asked, "Who was directly responsible for his killing?" Dharmaraja said, "Jayadratha. If he had not prevented our entry into the formation, Abhimanyu would be alive now. He was fighting so bravely but he was alone. If only we had gone in, he wouldn't have ended this way."

Arjuna, "Great sinner. Butcher. Did he who had received the gift of his life from us kill my son?" He shouted the question, as if he wanted the sky to hear it.

Dharmaraja didn't say anything further. But Bhima said immediately, "Where is the rule that simply because they built up a formation, we should penetrate it? And display our technical skill and virtuosity? We showed the typically Ksatriya attitude — ceremonial rather than calculated, formal rather than instrumental. These are wasteful tricks and dazzling techniques developed by professionals like Dronacharya to enhance their own importance and status. War, I repeat, is no display of skill or rules. It is nothing but naked killing, the only rule, kill or be killed. We should have simply rushed at them, rules or no rules. Where is the technique in all this?"

Arjuna sat silently watching Bhima's face. Dharmaraja was avoiding all direct encounter with Bhima's eyes. Krishna was grasping the situation silently and thoughtfully, as was his wont. Nakula, Sahadeva, Dhrishtadyumna and Satyaki felt themselves forced to re-examine their ideas of war strategy and conduct. There were whispers.

Bhima spoke again, "Secondly, I want you to recall that when we caught Jayadratha, I besought you to allow me to finish him off then and there. Well, I was given lessons in good conduct, patience, tolerance, and regard for him as our close kin. We were advised not to make our own cousin a widow. Thanks to our eldest brother, great expert in Dharma, we had to witness this scene today. Arjuna, you have great belief in the wisdom of Dharma raja, and then you also joined him to silence me. Ever since, he had been nursing a grievance against us, training his army to avenge the humiliation we had inflicted on him. Suppose you had heeded my words then?"

His head bent low, Arjuna kept silent, thinking within himself. Dharamaraja did not lift his eyes from the ground he was watching. Bhima continued, "Unless in tomorrow's fighting, we manage to trap and kill Jayadratha, we shall not have avenged the killing of our son. Killing the killer four days later cannot be regarded as a genuine act of revenge. It will be counted as a routine war casualty. It must be an act of revenge. Tell me Arjuna, shall I do it or will you do it? It was you who prevented me from killing him then. And it was also you who procreated Abhimanyu."

Arjuna, provoked by the taunt, stared at Bhima with ill-concealed dislike. Bhima's face was full of sneer, his eyes dancing with triumph. Arjuna stood up abruptly. He folded the fingers of his right hand across the palm, raised his hand to the sky, and shouted as if to force the sky to heed his words, "I shall not regard myself as a son of Pandu if I do not kill that wretch Jayadratha before tomorrow evening. If I fail in my vow, I shall no longer be a Pandava. I shall die by entering fire on the battle-field itself."

Nobody had so far suspected that Arjuna possessed such a lung capacity which could produce such a volume of voice. After shouting in such high pitch, he stood still like a pillar, his right hand arrested in space. It looked as if the roof of the hut was about to fall and he was supporting it. The silence that followed the shouting was so oppressive that it made breathing hard. After a moment, Krishna broke the silence, "Arjuna, these are unwise words that have come from your mouth. Let us certainly try to kill Jayadratha tomorrow, by all means. But, please, no formal vow should be taken in this matter. Once you take a vow, your commitment is total, irrevocable. Otherwise, our honour in the eyes of other people will collapse. Our own conscience will not leave us in peace if we make a vow and then not carry it out. Where was the need for you to rant such high-sounding words? You shouted loudly enough to reach every corner of our camp and even beyond the river. Do you think our enemies are fools? They may have deployed their spies in our camp. Or some of our men may have contact with their spies. If they got to know of it, they would spread it all over the battle-field. They may even withdraw Jayadratha from tomorrow's battle and provide him with extra-special security. When the evening comes, they will ask you: 'What has happened to your vow? We shall prepare a pit of fire for you, please fall into it and fulfil your vow. What are you going to do then?'

The silence generated by Krishna's question, proved to be even more terrifying. Supreme Commander, Dhrishtadyumna started to scratch his head, wondering how he was going to face the next day's war. Dharmaraja was scared of the consequences of not fulfilling the vow. A kind of chilling fear invaded the hut. Arjuna continued to stand in the same posture, as if frozen, his hand still high in the air, Yuyudhana tried to open his mouth to say something, but could utter only one syllable, swallowing the rest of his statement.

Dhrishtadyumna, "Satyaki, what was it you were going to say?"

Yuyudhana, "Nothing."

Dhrishtadyumna, "You are a man of very few words. But now we must pool all our ideas, and everyone must tell us what he has in mind. This is because Arjuna's vow is our collective responsibility."

Yuyudhana, "Well, what I was to say is not related to the vow."

Dhrishtadyumna, "It doesn't matter. Tell us what you have in mind." Others joined in urging Yuyudhana to tell them what he had in mind, all of them, Nakula, Sahadeva, Drupada, Virata, as if it gave them a chance to escape from the oppressive silence.

Yuyudhana replied, "Some other thought was tormenting me. Only after I went to Upaplavya and mixed with other Ksatriyas of this part, I began to realise it. Ksatriyas of these areas looked down upon the Yadavas for fleeing from Mathura in fear of Jarasandha. As for Krishna whose advice was primarily responsible for the flight, they call him names, ridicule him as a coward, a non-Ksatriya, a cowherd who sensing the presence of wild animals, would herd his cattle away, afraid to face the wild animals. When I was a young man of twenty or twenty-five, I, too, had doubts about the rightness of his advice. If Trigarta's challenge to fight him single-handed had been accepted by Arjuna only after he had arranged for Dharmaraja's security, we would not have met the defeat of this day! Abhimanyu would not have had to sacrifice his young life. Krishna, why didn't you counsel Arjuna to ignore their challenge?"

Krishna repeatedly said that he had, in fact, done exactly that. Dharmaraja added, "But Arjuna's sense of Ksatriya Dharma..." He didn't finish his statement.

Yuyudhana did not say anything further. Once again silence filled the atmosphere. But it was a relatively less oppressive silence. After a while, the supreme commander, Dhrishtadyumna, said, "Hereafter, we shall have to abandon many things that go under the name of Ksatriya Dharma. What Bhima has said is right. Why should we waste our energy in penetrating the enemy's formation? We should be guided only by our convenience and self- interest. We should turn situations to our advantage, and not become victims of our enemy's strategic formations. We should not regard war as a game of skill and a sport. It is a fight for spoils, for self-interest."

Nakula and Sahadeva nodded in complete agreement. Drupada and Virata also nodded approval. Arjuna found himself still unable to bring down his lifted hand.

Krishna said, "Let us now finish our meal and go to bed early to get as much sleep as we can. A most fierce fighting awaits us tomorrow."

Dhrishtadyumna, "Knowing it, how can we sleep at all?"

Krishna, "You must force yourself to sleep. Otherwise you will be unable to fight the war in full fitness. Look at Bhima. He is dozing off even where he is sitting. Bhima, have you had your meal?"

Bhima didn't hear the words. Nakula answered for him, saying that

they hadn't had it. At last, lowering his raised hand, Arjuna said, "I can go on without sleep for as many days as I wish."

Dharmaraja suggested, "Never mind if it is made of rice. We all need some Soma drink. That would help us to sleep." Catching the drift of the words, Sahadeva went out.

Nakula said, "Well, there is one pot full of palm toddy, stored in Bhima's hut. It has been supplied by the hunters who bring him fresh meat by hunting every day." When Nakula revealed Bhima's secret stock, everybody relaxed and the tension in the air eased considerably.

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Chapter 69

GANDHARI'S throat choked as she asked, "Sanjaya, is it not possible to stop this war?"

Sanjaya, "No. At this point there is no possibility at all. So far and before the war started, it was a political issue. Now this Arjuna's son has died. Bhima's son also has died. Here Duryodhana's son has died. Don't you think that the anger mounting in oneself when one's own child is killed is far greater than the anger produced by the death of one's parent? Also, on their side, their supreme commander Dhrishtadyumna has lost his father. Therefore, even if the Pandavas agree to a peace, their supreme commander may not agree. And the largest single unit of their army belongs to him. Of course, the Pandavas will not agree to any peaceful settlement now. As for our own Maharaja Duryodhana, he has been hissing like a snake ever since his son was killed."

Gandhari asked helplessly, "What can we do now to save the lives?"

Sanjaya, "Well, nothing but listen to the report of the war, collected and presented by me."

Gandhari had nothing to say in reply. Sanjaya also remained silent. Old Dhritarashtra was silent. Vidura was motionless, pinned to a pillar. Wanting oil, the lamp grew dimmer. Dhritarashtra said, "I can smell it. Is the light burning? Servant-maid, please look to it."

She had gone to sleep. When he shouted for her a second time, she ran into their presence and said, "Yes sir, the lamp is tapering off into extinction. But in the entire palace, there isn't a drop of oil. Well, tomorrow I shall manage to get a little oil from our neighbours."

The Maharaja asked angrily, "What do you mean by saying there is no oil in the palace?"

Servant-maid, "They came this evening to cart away all our oil stock, saying it was needed for the war. Today I could just manage to get a little oil by scouring an old pot. It was that oil that I poured into the wick today."

The Maharaja, "Then, what about tonight?"

The servant-maid, who had missed her sleep could not contain her anger, as she answered, "Maharaja, when the eyes cannot see, of what use is the burning of a lamp? Does it matter if it doesn't burn? I shall stay right here with you. I know the entire palace. Even in the dark I can manage to take you for relieving your calls of nature."

Dhritarashtra's face was turning red with shame and anger. Meanwhile, Vidura intervened, "Look here, maid, go to my house and get a mug of oil. Go right away. If you are afraid of going there alone, I shall accompany you. Or if there is a male sentry outside, ask him to go and fetch the oil."

Dhritarashtra, embarrassed, "Vidura, are you suggesting that the palace should borrow from your house? Or would it be charity? No, no. But I can't stand this lightless night. Please go and get it, but as loan."

They heard the steps of the servant-maid disappearing into the outer court-yard. The blind, old man's whole attention was focussed on the oil-less lamp, gradually getting extinguished. Not through sight but by smell. Right from the start, the smell of the oil in the wick exerted opposite effects on him — sometimes when the lamp was burning, exhilaration, and when it tapered off, despair. In a sense, he was a prisoner of that smell. To escape from it, he said, "You said that the vow of Arjuna to kill my son-in-law, Jayadratha, was known to our side in advance. But you also included Jayadratha's name among the dead. Didn't our side take advance precautions to protect him? You know that Duryodhana is extremely fond of his sister."

Sanjaya, "Of course, he is. And also they were very close to each other. Even earlier when Maharaja Jayadratha was abducting Draupadi..."Gandhari intervened to ask, "When? What happened?"

Sanjaya, "Not even two years have passed since that event. It was some two months before the Pandavas were to go on their exile in incognito. They were still in the forest. Jayadratha went there when there were no men around and Draupadi was alone. Seizing this opportunity, he carried off Draupadi. But the Pandavas intercepted him, and took Jayadratha as a prisoner. Bhima was about to finish him off. But regarding him as a son-in- law of the household through kinship, they let him off alive but not without humiliating him by shaving off his hair in three patches! Because of the anger he had against the Pandavas..."Gandhari asked puzzled, "How is that possible? What was their age then? He must have been around thirty-five or thirty-six. She must have been nearing fifty."

Sanjaya, "How should I know all this? No, I did not know the details. I was merely given the scrappy background information by my agents. And that is all I know."

Gandhari fell silent. Jolted out of his rhythm, Sanjaya also kept silent. But Dhritarashtra asked, "Sanjaya, I have no sight. I have not seen her. Is Draupadi so beautiful? Or what is the secret of her attractiveness?"

Sanjaya, "Maharaja, I, too, have not seen her. My own experience is that women who have relations with more than one male, exert seduction quickly on men in general. And she had five husbands..."Vidura intervened, "Sanjaya, your job is to report on the war. You are not expected to talk of extraneous things."

Sanjaya, "The matter came up as part of my war reporting, uncle. That, too, because the Maharaja specifically raised it. Left to myself, I have no interest in such things."

Dhritarashtra asked suddenly, "Sanjaya, didn't our people take precautions? How did they throw the wrong dice?"

Sanjaya, "Maharaja Duryodhana issued an order to the supreme commander, Drona, that Jayadratha must be saved at any cost. He saw in this two benefits. One, his brother-in-law saved from death. Two, Arjuna's death by fire, according to his own vow. Naturally, if these two happened, victory in the war, Maharaja calculated, would be easier for our side. It seems Arjuna had been . going about boasting that he knew all the tricks and strategies of his Guru, and that he would defeat his Guru easily. Therefore, the Maharaja asked revered Drona, 'Is there no strategic formation that you did not impart to Arjuna?" Then Drona replied, "Is that so? All right. Just you watch the strategic formation I shall work out today. To penetrate it and to reach Jayadratha would be impossible even for the king of Gods, Indra himself." He constructed what he called Chakrashakatavyuha or cart-wheel formation, an original idea of his. Jayadratha was encircled by his own troop first. Then men were arranged around this circle in the form of the petals of a lotus. This formation was surrounded by an outer rim in which elephants, horses, chariots, and the entire army were arranged into circles one running into the other. The idea was to prevent any attempt to attack Jayadratha before the evening, and from any direction. Wouldn't the Pandavas have not anticipated some such action to save Jayadratha? They also concentrated their entire army on the task of getting at Jayadratha. They were anxious that Jayadratha should not get away before the evening. They also formed a circle to ensure this. But they also took precaution to see that our side did not seize this situation to capture Dharmaraja. Accordingly, they cushioned Dharmaraja and other leaders with good defence. That day seemed to be the fiercest day of the war, and that moment the fiercest moment of that day. They were bursting with anger at the death of Arjuna's son. Duryodhana was also filled with the passion for avenging his son's

death. He wanted to smash them. The Pandavas were full of determination to resist and demolish the enemy forces. The number of chariots that got smashed up that day was beyond estimate. Countless horses, yoked to the chariot and used by the cavalry, lay writhing in death agony, their legs broken or crushed. As the horses put out of action in the battle cannot be driven back, they had to remain there. The only use for them was to carve out their meat. As the dead animals piled up and their blood flowed into rivers, the other horses ran helter-skelter. The death-cries of fallen soldiers reached one's ears even in that battle confusion and noise. Unable to withstand the attack of Arjuna, Maharaja Dussasana fell back with his men.

Drona took his place, but Arjuna did not rain his arrows on him. He instructed his men to attack merely the enemy soldiers. Dronacharya, very tired, his white dress full of dust, managed to shoot a stray arrow or so. How can an old man like him have the strength to use the weapon with full force? Lacking force and pace, his arrows grazed lightly the target before reaching them! After a while he stopped shooting the arrows altogether. Arjuna's charioteer, Krishna, turned the chariot in another direction, as they did not find Drona worth tackling. Then Arjuna's men attacked the men of the Yadava commander, Kritavarma. Maybe because he saw Krishna driving the chariot, Kritavarma moved his men aside to allow Krishna to proceed. After that Arjuna killed Sudakshina, the king of Kambhoja. His entire army was wiped out, as Arjuna's men cornered them and rained arrows on them non-stop. Arjuna encountered opposition from the king of Kalinga, Shrutayu, and his younger brothers, Achyutayu, Niyatayu, and Dirghayu, with their army. All the four brothers were killed in the pitched battle. Their men, losing their leaders, created total chaos on our side. Meanwhile, Dhrishtadyumna attacked Drona. He had all along been waiting for a chance to kill Drona, to settle an old score. He went for Drona with great fury, supported by the five sons of the Pandavas and their men. In this bitter encounter, Drona's men fought heroically to save him. Drona had divided his men into two parts. This allowed Dhrishtadyumna to penetrate, but only to be trapped by Drona's men, who now surrounded him and his troop. Had not Satyaki rushed to his aid, the story of the supreme commander of the Pandavas would have come to a sudden and sad end. In another sector of the battle, Vinda and Anuvinda, kings of Anupa country, were killed by Arjuna. Seeing the fast progress of Arjuna and his men, Maharaja Duryodhana himself faced Arjuna. As soon as he saw our Maharaja, Arjuna shouted or rather shrieked, calling him, 'Have you come at last, you eunuch?' Of course, our Maharaja was a match for him. He shouted back, If you are born to true Pandu seed, come and get me.' There were no further words exchanged. The battle rose

to a high pitch, as passions rose. Thanks to the preceding minor successes, the morale of Arjuna's men was very high. They had total faith in their leader's archery. They believed that in the entire war, there was no warrior to match his skill in the bow and arrows. Not just in aiming, not just in pace, but in the strength of his arrows whose energetic movement could kill the target at the very first hit. They were made of specially seasoned and tempered metal. Maharaja Duryodhana had to move to a side and let Arjuna pass with his men. In another corner of the field, the five sons of the Pandavas, succeeded in killing Shala, a younger brother of Bhuri, the king of Bahlika. There Bhima's son, Ghatotkacha, killed the Raksasa chief, Alambusha..."

Dhritarashtra asked, "Who is this Alambusha?"

Sanjaya, "I have no idea."

Vidura supplied the information, "Alambusha is a younger brother of the Raksasa, Baka. Baka was killed by Bhima while they were undergoing their exile in incognito in Ekachakra city. Baka's father was Kirmeera. In order to avenge the killing of his elder son, Baka, Kirmmeera fell on the Pandavas when they were in the forest. ' Bhima killed him, too. In order to avenge the deaths of his father and elder brother, Alambusha volunteered to join the party of Duryodhana. His main target was Bhima. Am I right?"

Sanjaya continued, "When Alambusha rushed to kill his father, Bhima, Ghatotkacha rushed at him and finished him off. In another part, Satyaki who had moved in to protect Dhrishtadyumna, fought there for a while, and then went with his troops to reinforce Arjuna's diminishing strength of numbers. There was blood on Arjuna's forehead, palms and thighs. His charioteer, Krishna, had also sustained some wounds. It was at this juncture that Kritavarma came with his men to block Satyaki."

Dhritarashtra, "Who is this Kritavarma?"

Sanjaya, "Didn't I mention earlier? He was the chief of the Yadava army. Didn't he join our side with the Yadava army? Krishna had secretly sent for him and met him. Krishna told him, You have brought the army all right. But if you were to command it, I, who is with the Pandavas, and you, will be on the opposite sides in the war. What will people say then? Aren't you ashamed of yourself?' I am not sure whether he was ashamed of himself or he had second thoughts. Balarama had handed over the command [f] of the Yadava army to this Kritavarma, and gone off on pilgrimage. Now, naturally, Satyaki found it difficult to fight the Dwaraka army because he had been one of its commanders. Men hesitated to draw the bow and send arrows on both sides. As a result, Satyaki shot an arrow at Kritavarma, but

he instructed his men not to attack Kritavarma's troop. There was no fighting between the soldiers under the two commands. While Satyaki's men obeyed his orders, Kritavarma's men did not. Feeling humiliated, Kritavarma withdrew behind. Meanwhile, Satyaki killed Jalasandha of Magadha region who was moving towards him. Then Satyaki pushed forward, and on the way Drona tried to obstruct him. But unable to do so, he moved aside. After Satyaki had moved away, Drona's sense of self-respect appeared to have been stung. Then he enthused his troop and rushed forward with great speed. They killed Dhrishtaketu, Sisupala's son, who had joined the Pandava camp. Then they despatched Brihatkshatra, the king of Kekaya country, to the land of death, Yama's land. They also killed Jarasandha's son, Sahadeva. They killed Dhrishtadyumna's son, Kshatradharma, who had just crossed their path. These were the achievements of the troops under Drona's command .How can one assess the course and state of this war? Arjuna's son died, Duryodhana's son died. Pandava's supreme commander Dhrishtadyumana's son died. How can the war be halted after this? Dhrishtadyumna was not there to see his son's killing. Bhima who was fighting near by saw it. Immediately he rushed like a tempest in that direction, got hold of a wheel of a broken chariot and hurled it at Drona's chariot. As it hit him, Drona's charioteer died instantaneously. The chariot itself was pulverised. However, Drona survived. To save their Guru, eleven of your sons rushed towards Bhima. Your sons, but none born to Devi Gandhari. One after the other, Bhima got hold of all the eleven, crushed their heads and twisted their throats as if he was wrenching fruits from a tree, and hurled their heads into our side. There was great noise, cries of fear and shock, utter pandemonium. The Pandava army's morale shot up, and they began to rush towards us with even greater enthusiasm than before. Then Bhima and Karna encountered each other. After a terrible battle, Karna was forced to move aside and let Bhima pass with his men. It was only after this that Bhima finished off one after the other, Devi Gandhari's sons, five of them, including Duqaya and Durmukha. It was about this time that Bhurishrava, son of Somadatta of the lunar lineage, fell on Satyaki. Satyaki was very exhausted. Bhurishrava lifted his sword to slice off Satyaki's head and avenge the death of his brother, Shala. Fortunately for Satyaki, Krishna saw this and pointed it out to Arjuna. He advised him to aim an arrow at Bhurishrava's right arm. Immediately Arjuna's arrow struck his arm, its sheer pace caused Bhurishrava's collapse on the spot. He shouted at Arjuna, "I was not fighting you. How could you shoot your arrow at me?" Bhurishrava turned his face towards Arjuna. Meanwhile, Satyaki taking advantage of the situation seized Bhurishrava's own sword which had slipped down to the ground when its owner had collapsed, and did not hesitate to cut off Bhurishrava's head. Then he hurled the head into our side. By that time it was getting closer to evening. The battle-field red with

blood and raw flesh was made fiercer by the red of the setting sun, producing a scene of utter terror. Arjuna had not yet managed to get close to Jayadratha. After all, wasn't it our main strategy to prevent him from achieving the vow of killing Jayadratha before evening? As part of the strategy of our warriors and men, one after another, got up, not to fight but to obstruct and delay Arjuna's movement. It was now made impossible for him to kill Jayadratha. Just then, Arjuna said to his men, 'It is evening now. Let us stop for the day.' Our soldiers heard those words. What soldier will not feel happy at the cessation of the battle? Various commanders on our side issued a similar order. Well, the war ceased. Now all that remained was to taunt Arjuna about his vow. Duryodhana himself brought Jayadratha on the chariot From a distance, he shouted to Arjuna, 'Arjuna, see, Jayadratha is right here. Do you like us to prepare your fire-pit? Or would you prefer to do it yourself?' You know the speed of Arjuna's hand? His aiming is also deadly accurate. In the twinkle of an eye, the sharp tip of his metal arrow went straight with lightning speed to Jayadratha's neck and pierced it three inches deep. It was followed by some ten similar arrows. These other arrows were to see that nobody was allowed to attend to the wound of Jayadratha and save his life. Shrieking in agony, Jayadratha collapsed. Just then, Arjuna's charioteer, Krishna, shouted to Duryodhana, 'Duryodhana, look there, the sun has not yet set!' Well, does it not show that the whole strategy of the Pandavas in killing Jayadratha was the handiwork of Krishna...?"

Dhritarashtra shouted, "Cheating, damned cheating!"

Sanjaya, "What you call cheating, they call strategy. They did not stop merely with killing Jayadratha. They ordered their soldiers to attack our men. On our side, our men had rested their bows and were relaxing their bodies. Some of them were sitting there, stretching their legs. The unexpected attack from the enemy's arrows killed some of our men and confounded all. Some were so confused that they did not even realise that they had bows and arrows with them, and ran helter-skelter. From the Pandava side, commanders with their men rushed at our men. As a result, the formation became disrupted. Our defeat led to a total collapse of morale, and their victory increased their self-confidence and enthusiasm. Because of the break-up of the formation and the fleeing of our men, the location of the fighting shifted away some six miles. The site of the morning's session of the battle was now vacated. I went there to see the site personally. Yes, I managed to go all right. But how scared I was at that terrifying spectacle of total destruction of everything! No, I was not frightened by the human bodies writhing and crying in the throes of death. No, not by the horses lying flat on the ground, their, legs and tongues stretched by death. No, what really scared me were the dogs and jackals and wolves which had gathered there to feast on

raw flesh and blood! I was literally scared for my very life, terrified by the thought that these hungry and greedy beasts might not distinguish between a living being like me and the corpses strewn everywhere on the ground! And,mind you, they were wild dogs. When the shape of death filled the whole space, would these animals mark me out from it as a sole symbol there of life? Yet, I managed to stay there for a while, surveying the scene. What did I see? Blood flowing and solidified, flies buzzing, fallen bits of warrior equipment, necklaces tom from necks, ear-rings torn from their ears, heads hanging from mutilated trunks, and all sorts of head-gear rolled away from the heads of the dead and the lost. Here and there, a crown or two. Precious stone ornaments, dazzling arm-bands, gold coins shining brilliantly, flags of fallen chariots, strips of coloured cloth that had once decorated chariots, multicoloured seats wrenched from the smashed chariots, the ropes that had once been reins, broken chariot wheels, ropes used as yokes, tridents, daggers, swords, spears, javelins, and all sorts of assorted weaponry, chariots abandoned but still filled with a stock of arrows, bells around the elephants' necks, mugs and other vessels for storing water.

How much can one man's memory carry of that awesome sight? One thing was certain. Everything there was broken, destroyed, damaged, dying, dead and rotting. And the packs of wild animals feasting on flesh and blood with total abandon. I thought they, too, were warring with dead flesh. And the vultures which competed for the booty of war. I thought if anyone had gained from the war, it was these beasts of prey! After a few minutes, fear overcame me and I literally fled from the field..."

Dhritarashtra intervened, "Sanjaya, pause for a second. My head is giddy with your report."

Sanjaya was silent fora while. The silence was the silence that filled the air after a rain of hailstones. A silence packed with the violence of war, the memory of war. After some time, Dhritarashtra asked, "Is the lamp burning?"

Vidura, "Yes. It is burning, with the oil from my house."

Dhritarashtra, "There is no smell at all."

Vidura, "Maharaja, the oil used in your palace is mixed with sandal oil. Ours is ordinary oil. Though our oil may not exude aroma, it burns equally bright."

Dhritarashtra began to breathe slowly. He had a feeling that death had invaded everything. He didn't speak any further.

Sanjaya said, "Well, let me go home at least. I shall be back tomorrow morning. My throat is paining because of continuous

talking for such a long time."

Sighing again, Dhritarashtra said, "No, no. My heart tells me that it is going to be more and more tragic news to come. Yet my curiosity is too great to let me rest until I hear all. After all this, I feel I may not get sleep tonight. Only give us a little pause before resumption." Dhritarashtra had difficulty in breathing.

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Chapter

70

DURYODHANA asked, "Did you flee out of fear?" In the camp, there was a torch burning, exuding mild smell, as if it was a film covering the stench of the rotting corpses. Supreme Commander, Drona, and Karna stood nearby. Through the smoke-screen of the torch they were able to see that Maharaja Duryodhana was watching them intently. He said, "I am carefully watching what is happening in the field, what each one of you is doing, how bravely you are fighting, and when you are fleeing. I also get reports to supplement my own observation."

Drona bent his head low. Duryodhana said, "Acharya, Dharmaraja was not taken prisoner."

Drona blurted out, "But Jayadratha's death was not through any mistake of mine, I can assure you."

Duryodhana, "How could I imagine that the enemies will cheat?' Is that what you want to say? Let it be. But what are your achievements anyway? Why didn't you kill Arjuna? Did you leave him to be finished by Karna?"

Drona didn't reply. Duryodhana continued, "Out of respect for you as an elder, I have been so far appealing to you with utmost politeness. I did it with revered Bhishma and lost seven divisions consisting of thousands of men, horses and elephants. In just ten days. I have no idea of the total losses sustained in this one day through you. At least two divisions. What does the science of warfare say about a supreme commander who is capable of losses of such magnitude?" By this time his voice had risen in tone and volume.

Drona replied tamely, "Maharaja, this is a terrible war. The enemies, too, have sustained heavy losses."

Duryodhana almost screamed, "But no important leader has been killed on their side."

Drona, "The death of leaders is a matter of chance, a matter of luck. A few army divisions of theirs have been defeated."

Duryodhana, "Look here. It has been little more than forty ' years

since you first arrived in Hastinavati. In all these years you have enjoyed a life equal to a king's. Isn't there a debt owed to one's king just as there are debts owed to one's father, the gods and the sages?" In the far distance, cries from the battle-field drifted towards them. As the wind blew from that side, one could hear the hissing of arrows. Sounds reflecting and announcing catastrophes. Outside the hut, darkness reigned. Inside, the multi-coloured canopy which served as a roof, walls covered with colourful cloth, and the white cloth wound round the pillars, had all turned grey due to smoke. Duryodhana continued relentlessly, "We have no lack of soldiers who can fight well. Our defeat so far has been due to failure in strategy, failure in proper leadership. I think we must face the fact that our leadership has been very poor. You are a great and universally acclaimed teacher of archery. At least you should have some fear of the damage to your fame and stature if you suffer defeat?" His voice now rose to a frenzy. He was screaming so loudly that his tongue was in danger of being torn away. He now flung an open threat at Dronacharya, saying, "Would you prefer to be retired like Bhishma or achieve something worth-while? Please, think well and tell me right now."

Once again, Drona bent his head low. The wind blowing from the battle-field brought back the sounds of the war. The flame of the torch was on the point of being blown off, but somehow didn't. The sentry at the door rushed to pour two spoonfuls of oil to make the torch glow brighter. Now Duryodhana's voice had come down so low as to be almost like whispering to himself. He said, "As an expert in warfare and a great teacher, you should be aware that when the war is on, it is not wise to change the supreme commanders. Well. This is what you had yourself taught us. Of course, if the commander dies while in harness, it is another matter. Look at them. The same supreme commander continues."

Drona, "Maharaja, don't be under the wrong impression that I am afraid of dying. Let me assure you that either tonight or before tomorrow's dawn I shall kill either that supreme commander or his father."

Duryodhana, "That means you will be avenging the old grievance you have against the Panchalas. But what are you going to do specifically for your Maharaja?"

Drona, "Compared to me, Dhrishtadyumna is relatively younger. As for the Pandavas, you are their equal in age. This body of mine may not carry the burden beyond its capacity."

Duryodhana was silent. It was not clear whether he had nothing to say or he didn't want to say what he had in mind. Inside himself, he felt hopelessly squeezed. He found it difficult to sit in silence. He said,

"Our enemies have thrown to the four winds the rules and norms they had accepted in the agreement with Bhishma. As one watches the battle continuing into the night today, it seems they recognise no distinction between day and night, and carry on fighting without sleep and food and with no opportunity for anyone to take rest. Now, both of you proceed to join the war. I shall also go with you."

Bowing to the Maharaja respectfully, Drona came out of the hut. The darkness outside was dense. The torches burning here and there near the huts accentuated the sense of darkness. Karna remained inside. Dronacharya waited for him outside. After a while Karna came out. The two proceeded towards their chariots, standing at a distance. As they reached the chariots, Drona said to Karna, "You, too, were there when the Maharaja Duryodhana accused us and warned us. Therefore, his strictures and charges apply to you equally."

Karna didn't say anything. Drona saw in the light of the torch held by the charioteer that Karna's face was grave and thoughtful."

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Chapter

74

AT this point in Sanjaya's narrative, Dhritarashtra asked, "Sanjaya, as you proceed, you seem to be growing more blunt and relentless. Why is this?"

Sanjaya, "Why do you say that, Maharaja?"

Dhritarashtra, "Regardless of the effect of your words on me and this lady, you keep on giving us news in a cold-blooded manner."

Sanjaya, "I am a mere reporter. How can I communicate in my report the pleasantness that is not there in the reality which I report?"

Dhritarashtra, "I was wondering whether your manner became indifferent because my son was suffering defeat."

Sanjaya, "Please don't think like that. If you want it, I shall stop reporting to you."

Dhritarashtra, "No, I don't mean that. I want you to report. If persons like me who cannot directly witness events, are not given reports by professionals like you, how can we know what is going on in the great world?"

Sanjaya, "Then shall I continue my report? Let m^see. What was I saying?"

Dhritarashtra could not remember. Vidura came to their aid, and said, "Duryodhana's folly caused a great disaster."

Sanjaya, "In the battle that took place in the darkness of the night, the two armies could not have been evenly matched. The five Pandavas were just fresh from the experience of twelve years' exile in the forest. They had acquired the ability to move about in the dark of the forest without any torch. Remember, most of Dhrishtadyumna's men were essentially drawn from the forest tribes. Bhima's son, Ghatotkacha, and his troop, were, of course, actually Raksasas. They do most things in the darkness of the night. And they sleep in the day! Therefore, they could attack us in the night effectively and shoot at us with deadly accuracy. None of our

commanders has this advantage and background. Most of our soldiers are from cities and towns. They cannot do what Ghatotkacha and his followers iron} the forests can do — produce animal noises and sounds to enthuse themselves as well as scare the enemy, and shriek like ghosts, and, in general, shout in such a way as to strike terror in the hearts of the listeners. They are not fellows who shoot from the front. In the night, they pick up bits and pieces of broken chariots and hurl them into our men. Imagine what commotion and confusion this would create in our camp. Some of them did not hesitate even to lift the wild beasts that had come in the night to eat the flesh of dead animals and men, and threw them into our midst. Imagine the chaos created by it in our camp! In the darkness, our soldiers, utterly confounded, fell on each other and damaged their own fellow-soldiers. It was difficult to make out things in the darkness, and moreover our men also felt that the enemy was strong enough to have penetrated deeply into our side. Should they carry on fighting in this darkness or not? It is a terrible choice. If we don't fight, they would destroy us and burn our camp, set fire to our chariots and make off with the horses, and set fire to our arsenals. Or they might march towards Hastinavati, undefended now, and capture it. Given this range of possibilities, how can we be certain about the precise intention of the enemy? Therefore, our first priority was to counter the darkness. Accordingly, Maharaja Duryodhana got ready thousands of torches, properly oiled, and saw to it that the battle-field was well illuminated! The torches actually arrived at midnight. The soldiers carrying torches were deployed in such a way that they could more or less cast light on the entire battle-field..."

Dhritarashtra, "Bravo! Excellent!"

Unmindful of the interruption and yet raising his voice a little, Sanjaya continued, "In the blazing light of the torches, their men were able to spot our men very easily. Thus the result was that we provided them our men as an excellent target! Naturally they shot at our men accurately and killed them in good number. Even worse was the fact they their men were not easily or clearly visible to our men. This was because the light cast by our torches could not travel so far as to cover the enemies perfectly. Naturally, most of the killing was done by them, and virtually all the causalities were our men. However, our men were under the illusion that they were demolishing the enemy troops! In fact, most of the arrows shot from our side had no clear targets. Many died on our side. Many were severely wounded and suffered loss of blood. Duryodhana Maharaja had also ordered that men should be there to carry pots of oil and replenish the torches with oil from time to time. As the enemy arrows shot the pots to pieces and oil spills the torches shot up into high flames and took the lives of many. Thus a number of men of our

side came to be burnt alive. As I have already said, they could locate our men clearly. Thus Bhima was , ‘ able to spot Duryodhana and rush towards him and fall on him. In the same way, Nakula fell on Shakuni,Shikhandi on the old man Kripacharya, Ghatotkacha on Ashwatthama, Drupada on Karna’s son, Sushena, Virata on Salya, one of the Upapandavas, Shataneeka on one of your sons, Chitrasena, and Dhrishtadyumna himself on Drona. They thus attacked our troops under these commanders, and decimated them. It was only then that the nature of the real situation dawned on Drona. He withdrew a little from the front line, and asked, ‘Which idiot ordered the use of these torches?’ When he learnt that it had been done by the Maharaja himself, he said, ‘Call the Maharaja. But first, immediately put off all the torches.’ Everywhere in our camp, the shouting was, ‘Put them off.’ Then the torches were extinguished one after another. But this created another problem. Because the torches were put out so suddenly, their eyes became momentarily blinded. This gave the enemies an excellent opportunity to fall on our men and crush them and smash them. Right thereon the battle-field, Drona called for Duryodhana. Duryodhana who was encountering Bhima and his men, handed over the command of his confounded troop to Dussasana, and hurried to Drona. Drona began to chide the Maharaja, ‘Why do you do senseless things without any understanding of the situation? Do you think that the work of a commander is as easy as issuing orders, reclining against a pillow? Why did you order the use of burning torches without consulting me? Remember, your royal authority has no place here on the battle-field, and it has scope only in Hastinavati when you sit comfortable on your throne! Here, I am the sovereign, and nothing, I mean nothing, should be done without my explicit consent!’ In fact, Dronacharya scolded the Maharaja severely. My informant told me that he had no idea that the old man could produce such a loud voice! Imagine, right there in the heart of our army, the old man raining abuse continuously on Duryodhana!

It seems Duryodhana’s body-guard, negotiating the aimlessly rushing men on our side, reached Karna and informed him of what was happening, of how the Maharaja, his head bent low, was listening to the abuses of his Guru. Karna handed over the command of his troop to one of his senior men, and rushed to the spot to see what was happening. What does he see? The Maharaja, his jewel-studded crown glittering in the light of a torch, standing there struck dumb! Drona was ranting like a mad, old man. A few soldiers had collected around them to watch the proceedings. It took Maharaja Karna a few minutes to gather the information. Then he began to lash at Drona. He said, ‘True, a mistake was committed. But remember it was done by the Maharaja. If a mistake emanates from the throne, those under it should politely appeal against it, at the

most. They cannot criticise it. Most certainly they have no right to use the kind of abusive language you have used today. Your head has swollen because you have been made our Supreme Commander. First, learn how to behave with courtesy and humility.' Drona, enraged, gave it back, 'You fellow, you are talking like this because you are jealous of me for having assumed that office. After all, you are a Süta 'Karna answered, 'You, old fellow, I have neither your servility nor your over-ambitiousness. If you don't restrain your tongue and speak to the king with the respect due to him, I shall slice your tongue!' In fact, Karna is believed to have gone forward to attack Drona. Would the Acharya take it lying down? But fortunately for us, calm prevailed. The Maharaja himself defused the situation by patching up between the two. He advised both that it was no time for internal quarrels and differences and that our strength lay in unity, and that we should never lose it. He assured Drona that in future he would do nothing without consulting him and getting his approval. After Drona left, the Maharaja, his eyes over-flowing with tears, embraced Karna..."

After some time, Gandhari showered praise on Karna by saying, "Karna, I have borne fifteen sons, not fourteen!"

Sanjaya, "Yes, great lady, it was Maharaja Karna who won that night's battle. I was about to narrate it to you." Gandhari urged, her depression somewhat dispelled and her enthusiasm enhanced, "Yes, tell us, tell us. Listening to Karna's heroic deeds gives me the same pleasure as listening to Duryodhana's!"

Sanjaya continued, "Drona must have complained to his son that Karna had spoken abusively to him. Ashwatthama left the field and rushed to kill Karna. It fell to Maharaja Duryodhana to pacify him. Let that be. When they reviewed the situation, they found that most of the havoc that night was caused by Bhima's son, Ghatotkacha. Therefore, it was decided that he should be killed, since he was the main cause of our losses. Moreover, our men were mortally afraid of him, and only his death could restore the self-confidence of our men. When all was said and done, he was a Raksasa and his men were Raksasas. And it was night, their time of the day. They threw with incredible force whatever came to their hand into our army. They enjoyed hurling heads at our men, as if they were balls. And their fantastic cries, screams and shrieks! And that noise made terror thousand times more terrible! To crown it all, our men believed that the Raksasas possessed special, magical powers. Not just among ordinary soldiers, even among the Ksatriya princes and rulers. That added to their fear. It seems a large number of our men, taking ad vantage of the night, fled from the battle to return to their towns and villages. Even some rulers left for their native lands. It became absolutely clear to Maharaja Duryodhana that unless Ghatotkacha

was finished off, his entire army would melt out of sight by the next morning. Karna assured him that he would kill Ghatotkacha, and went for the Raksasa chief, with a troop of Süta soldiers. At this time, Duryodhana Maharaja did something else. There was a kin of Bakasura whom Bhima had killed, with the name, Alayudha. He was one of the Raksasas who had joined our side to take revenge on Bhima. They had done it voluntarily. He had not been killed yet. But he did not belong to the type that would accept discipline easily and obey unquestioningly the orders of a commander. He and his companions were sleeping somewhere. The Maharaja sought them out and ordered them to finish off Ghatotkacha and his army. Alayudha didn't have a sizeable army of his own. But it was compensated for by their reckless disregard for their lives. That is how the Raksasas are made. Like a tiger that attacks without a thought of its own life, and fights to the finish. Their natural violence was fuelled by their passion for revenge. They had come to regard Ghatotkacha's mother, Hidimbe, as a great betrayer of the Raksasa community as a whole. They saw this as a good chance to avenge her by killing her son.'Alayudha fell with fury on Ghatotkacha and his men. They, too, were Raksasas, and were able to meet them with equal force, matching their weird screaming with their own shouting, their magic with their own magical skill. Our soldiers did not seem to have realized this.

Our men got scared that ghosts and devils had come to attack them and scattered in utter confusion. It was dark, and what situation is better for the display of magical powers than night? It seems Bhima was fighting somewhere nearby. He too was roaring like his son, and following his son's strategy of reckless fighting. As soon as Alayudha saw that this was Bhima who had killed his relative, Baka, he rushed on Bhima with his group. Bhima's men were scared. They were scared,.especially of the magical powers of the attackers. There was darkness. Bhima's men, who had shown skill in fighting their Aryan enemies, were so frightened by the Raksasa attack that they scattered helter-skelter. Then Alayudha, rushing with the pace of a tempest, seized him. Bhima had been fighting since the morning of the previous day, without rest and respite, and he had also been fighting energetically throughout the war so far. Alayudha, on the contrary, had been spending all these days, eating excellent meat and enjoying sound sleep. He was therefore in a relatively more advantageous position than Bhima. With one blow, he caused Bhima to fall down, his head giddy. Even Ghatotkacha was surprised by the attack of the Raksasas on the enemy side. He was observing their movements. Now he saw Alayudha sitting on the chest of his fallen father. In a flash, he realised that if there was the slightest delay Alayudha would tear asunder his father's chest and drink directly his blood. He rushed in that direction, fell on Alayudha and got hold of his throat.

Poor Bhima had to bear the burden of two hefty Raksasas! Soon Alayudha rolled to one side. Bhima felt relieved. Then the two Raksasas moved some distance away, attacking each other, clasping each other, Bhima got up but didn't have the strength to fall on Alayudha. He sat breathing hard. Karna who was passing that way saw what was happening in this part of the field, he rushed towards Ghatotkacha, took him j completely by surprise, and dealt a blow to his neck with his sword and rushed back. Alayudha died as he was squeezed to death by Ghatotkacha. Blood began to flow from the wound caused by Karna's sword. Ghatotkacha screamed in agony, fell on the dead body of Alayudha, and himself died..."

Immediately enthused, Dhritarashtra shouted, "Bravo! Bravo Karna! Well, did not Arjuna cheat us Dy shooting an arrow at r Bhurishrava's right arm and kill him, when he was fighting with somebody else?"

Sanjaya, "I did not suggest that Maharaja Karna was cheating. I am merely reporting things as they happened. Duryodhana, Dussasana, Kripacharya, Ashwatthamacharya, Dronacharya and Shakuni and others shouted the good news of Karna killing Ghatotkacha. Everybody joined jubilantly in the shouting. Thanks to Karna, our men shed their fear and became more self-confident..."

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Chapter

72

BHIMA had shouted to Ghatotkacha that Karna was coming at him with his sword. But Ghatotkacha could not hear it. He attempted to intercept Karna before Alayudha breathed his last, but he found it impossible. His eyes had become blinded by weakness and exhaustion. He thought he heard Ghatotkacha's voice, the kind of scream one made when one's breath was being choked. Bhima said, "Damn this blinding of the eyes and this giddiness." He felt that he saw his limbs writhing in agony, but his eyes still did not focus properly. Then suddenly it became clear. He could now see things. He suddenly jumped with all the energy at his command and went towards his son. He touched his body. From the big slash across the throat, blood was rushing down like a waterfall. He tried hard to halt its flow but to no avail. Suddenly Ghatotkacha's screaming stopped. His limbs turned stiff. Bhima stood there still and silent as if rooted to the spot! From somewhere an arrow flew to touch his right arm. Another arrow whizzed past his left! Almost instinctively, Bhima pulled out the arrow from his right arm. Then bending low, positioning his legs properly, he lifted his son's body and carried it on his back. He let the hand of the dead body dangle across his chest. Then got up. His dead son's face was touching the back of his head. Bhima returned to his side. He heard someone shout, "Coward, coward. Eunuch. Chicken-hearted fellow." Someone was saying these words, as he was running fast with his son's body. He wondered who it could be. Was it Karna? No, he couldn't make out the voice. Bhima increased his pace. His movement was obstructed by the dead bodies of men, horses, broken chariots, and all sorts of wreckage.

He carried the body on his back without making even a fractional change in its position. Streams of sweat started pouring down his body. No, it wasn't sweat. It was blood from the neck of the dead body, flowing across his back and chest, slowly drying up. He thought, as the chest-pressed to his back, "What a solid and strong chest my son had. It is hard as stone against my back. His arms are as strong as metal." He began to run literally. A light fell on them from behind. Someone was following them, carrying a torch. The torch-bearer went past Bhima, as if he was showing the way to somebody. Bhima lifted his head to see. Behind the back of his skull, the face of

the dead body leaned. Bhima recognized the person running with the torch as Neela. Though he had run so far, Bhima didn't feel tired. He didn't breathe hard. There was no giddiness and blinding of the eyes. No sweat, only blood. Ghatotkacha's blood blended with the blood from his own wounds. He climbed the mound and got down into the plain below. Blood had flown across his shoulders, chest, stomach, waist and thighs. The dead body was slipping down along the streaming blood. Then he pulled up the body so that it was more securely positioned. Then he bent further and descended the mound. Then Neela said, "Maharaja, we have to cross the rivulet on a bamboo bridge. It has to bear not only my weight but also both your weights. So, please don't run. Let's move slowly." At the entrance, Bhima said, "You there, I am Maharaja Bhimsena. This is my servant, Neela. Let us in." Before his hut, Bhima positioned himself like a sitting elephant, and slowly laid down his son's body on a mat on its back. He placed his face on the dead son's chest, found it very warm. Then he stretched both his hands, placed the left hand under Ghatotkacha's back, squeezed his waist with his right hand. He began to dash his face against the dead son's chest, while lamenting unabashedly, "My son, my son, Ghatotkacha." He felt on his back Draupadi's arms, and heard her voice, "Bhima, did our Ghatotkacha die?" As she pressed her face to the dead man's chest, she found the heart still and silent and cold. The frozen silence seemed to be communicating its own sound. Bhima himself fainted, and he heard words reach him from far away, "Bhima, you are awake. Look hear. Look at your elder brother. I am Krishna. A torch was carried by someone running at a distance.

Dharmaraja said, "We heard that this had happened. We had made a pact with the enemies that there should be no combat till moon-rise so that men on both sides could get some rest. I handed the command to Satyaki, got on a horse and hurried here. Arjuna, you hold Bhima from that side."

It was the silence that could be heard, not giddiness. He was told, "Maharaja, the funeral pyre is ready." Bhima once again strapped the dead body to his back and stood up. He wouldn't hear of their help, but proceeded straight to the pyre and placed the body on it. Then Bhima stood there like a lifeless pillar. On one side were Draupadi and Arjuna, and on the other, Krishna and Dharmaraja. The servants were poking the burning logs. The red body of Bhima's son turned black like ink and then became cinders. Then the flames slowly consumed the perishable body. Bhima suddenly turned to the left, and asked Arjuna, "Arjuna, you used to say that Karna is reserved for you. Is that true or shall I go now and lay him low?"

Arjuna, "Yes, he is earmarked for me. He is my target. I swear this by mother Kunti. You don't touch him. I shall slice off his head and

throw it at your left foot. Let us not do things in haste. Am I right, Krishna?"

Finally, the body caught fire and became part of the burning pyre. The shape of the legs, hands and head had not yet been totally destroyed. Bhima ordered Neela, "Neela, you wait here till the whole body turns to ashes, then gather the ashes, and offer the ashes to a running river. See that not even a single bone is left to feed the dogs and jackals." Bhima abruptly turned back and began to walk away swiftly. Krishna ran after him, and asked, "Bhima, where are you going?"

Bhima, "Back to the battle-field. I have to finish the Raksasa companions of Alayudha. Ghatotkacha's men are now leaderless."

Krishna said, "That is our job. Do you know how your face looks? Please go and sleep for half a day at least. After that you can deal with them. Draupadi, please, take hold of Bhima's hand and walk him back to the hut, and put him to sleep. Now he has only anger inside. But you cannot fight a war with just anger."

Draupadi took hold of his hand and dragged him towards his hut. Like an over-sized calf, Bhima followed her. She lighted the lamp, unrolled the mattress and made the bed first. She told Bhima, "Blood has coagulated on your head, body, hands. Won't you take a bath?"

Bhima, "No."

Draupadi, "The kitchen fire bums throughout the day. You may even get hot water."

Collapsing into a sitting posture, he asked." Is it possible to wash away the smell of the blood by bathing?"

Draupadi sat close to him. She squatted, her legs folded. She took hold of his shoulders, saying, "Come and sleep here." Then she rested his head on her lap. No sooner did Bhima's head touch her lap, than he went to sleep. He thought darkness had set in. Twice he sighed. Then he turned to the right, his head still on her lap. He felt pain in the right arm where the arrow had pierced him. Then he tried to lie on his back. After a minute he turned to the left side. The next moment he began to weep loudly like a child. Draupadi bent down to clasp his head to her breasts. She said, "Bhima, who knows whom else this war will swallow up? Don't weep. Didn't Abhimanyu die yesterday?" Her words of consolation came out of her throat with difficulty.

Sobbing, Bhima said, "No, not because of his death. When Karna came, brandishing his sword, I could see him. But I lacked the strength to get up. I was paralysed and as ineffective as a dead man. I had to watch helplessly and passively the killing of my own son

before my eyes! I just couldn’t prevent it. Bhima is an empty shell, drained of all strength. A eunuch."

Then he started to sob even more loudly. She lowered her head further and took his head deeper between her breasts with both hands. His hot tears soaked her dress and reached her thighs. She didn’t know how to console him beyond what she had done. The blood on his face rubbed off a little on her cheeks, hands and chest. After a while, Bhima stopped weeping. Then he began to breathe more freely and easily. In a few moments, he was sleeping soundly, snoring in a small way.

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Chapter 73

THE new charioteer asked, "Which way shall I drive, Acharya?"

There was no reply from him.

Charioteer, "Acharya, unless you tell me which way to go how I shall know where to go?"

Acharya, "Uh."

The charioteer did not take the grunt to be a real answer to his question. Therefore, he halted the chariot there itself. It was way beyond the battle-ground. Beyond the place from where could be heard the noises of the battle. It was dark, too dark to see anything. There was no clear order from the commander. The charioteer began yawning. He was feeling so sleepy that he was prepared to give away even his life for a moment's sleep! The eyes were closing of their own accord. The only consolation was that the whip round his knee did not fall down.

Drona calmed down like a boiling vessel after the lid was taken off. He thought, "What does Duryodhana think is the task of a supreme commander, sitting there comfortably reclining against a pillow, pushing forward his old teacher to the front? Well, I am happy that I could make him stand on the ground below, head bent, while I sat in the chariot!"He cast his eyes around. He saw something in the far distance, but was not sure whether it was just a tree or a chariot. Of course, it was now dark, but even in day-light his sight had become weak. He couldn't see objects at a distance, and how could he expect to aim with accuracy? He felt that old men should not get involved in war. He began to yawn. He needed sleep desperately. If only he could go back to his hut and stretch on his bed! But he was the supreme commander, and how could he do it? He stretched his legs in the chariot itself. Then he remembered Bhishma. It seemed Duryodhana, reclining against a thick pillow, had ordered the dismissal of Bhishma from the position of Supreme Commander. Drona thought, "Let him dare remove me. I am sure he will not be so foolish as to lose Ashwatthama." Then he leaned his back against the seat and closed his eyes in comfort. The noises and shrieks from three

directions began to subside gradually., They would eventually vanish, he thought. He adjusted his position to sleep better. He remembered it, and he remembered the cold, cutting knife-edge of the cold. When he was just feeling at his best, he heard the messenger from the Maharaja, "Commander Acharya, the Maharaja has the idea of pitting Alayudha, a Raksasa, against another Raksasa, Ghatotkacha. He has sent me to get your approval for it."

He said, "Yes." Then he awoke slowly. He felt cold and the limbs felt stiff. Re felt like having a blanket. The charioteer was snoring in his seat. Drona felt satisfied, "At least he takes my consent before acting. He has accepted my stipulation." There was no sound from the right. From the front, only a little sound emanated. From the left corner, he could make out from the sounds that the fighting had shifted farther. He wondered, "What military formation, what strategy in such darkness!"He thought that if he continued to be out in this cold till morning, he would certainly get sore throat, cold and body ache. He shouted, "You, charioteer, Tapana, did you hear me? Send someone to fetch me a blanket. In the meanwhile, make fire by lighting a broken chariot. This cold is beyond my endurance."

The wood of the broken chariot gave excellent fire. It was a quality chariot made of good wood, standing there broken. Drona thought it had at last found some use. Then the blanket arrived, and it was sharply cold. He ordered the charioteer to warm the blanket before the blazing fire and then cover it around his body. After he was wrapped up in the blanket, he found it cosy and comfortable. He asked the charioteer to warm up a piece of rag and then apply it to his knees. Then he added, "If you have a little oil, you can rub it on the knees. It would make the pain vanish. You say you have no oil? Never mind. If you expose continuously to the fire, your head will turn and your stomach will be in commotion."

Drona added, "The blanket is warm. The chariot is the right thing. Push and heap all the arrows to one corner. Make space for me to lie down and sleep."

Charioteer, "Commander Acharya, Maharaja Duryodhana has sent the message for you that Maharaja Karna has killed Ghatotkacha."

Drona, "I am happy. Send them my message that they should share the credit for the achievement jointly."

Drona thought that the noise and commotion had come down because of Ghatotkacha's death. He said to himself, "May be my guess that the scene of fighting had shifted farther away is wrong. Somehow I am not able to sleep in comfort. Maybe I should have asked for another blanket to spread on the floor. What is the point of sitting up with nothing to do?" He heard war cries from somewhere.

In the strong wind, it was difficult to locate the source of cries. Drona told the charioteer, "Tapana, take me to the site of the battle." Being a young fellow, Tapana could see things, even if somewhat imperfectly. Drona asked, "Why are the horses standing with their front feet up, as if scared?" He answered, "Master, there is a corpse on the way." Drona said, "Then get the path cleared of the corpses and drive." Tapana, "Yes, I am already doing it. Yet, now and then..."Drona felt the smell, and remembered the ritual fire. He asked, "Why hasn't the winter rain arrived yet?"

Tapana, "How do I know astrology? You should tell me."

Drona thought, "Ghatotkacha's death has not put an end to the battle. It is difficult to know where exactly the Pandava warriors are positioned to shoot their arrows. I don't know why our men are not rushing at them and attacking them. As if they think their job is just waiting." He said to his charioteer, "Tapana, proclaim to our people the fact of my coming here and being here in this place." As he surveyed the situation, he thought, "Our army seems to have become thin. Perhaps most of them went home because it was dark. Fighting in the dark involves its own brand of cruelty. No, it is more like gambling with an unknown future. Why did we get engaged in it? No, it was not our making. We didn't voluntarily engage in it. They succeeded in trapping us in it. The fighting is still going on somewhere there. Here, there is only cold. I hear someone shouting, 'We, too, want rest.' "Whose voice is it? Somebody from our side?" He asked his charioteer, "Tapana, take the chariot a little farther. Enquire from some commanding officer about that shouting." They encountered Ashwatthama who explained, "It is Arjuna shouting to demand some rest. The men on both sides are exhausted. He is suggesting that men on the two sides can get rest and sleep till the moon-rise before dawn. He is asking whether you are agreeable to it. Our men are also saying that they need rest. They are all dozing wherever they are — on horses, on elephants, in the chariots, just standing! They have been in action since yesterday night when we set up the cart-wheel formation strategy.

During all this time, they have not been allowed even to go and defecate." Drona said, "Is it another tactical trick that Arjuna is up to? Ask him, swearing in my name, whether he is sincere and truthful in his request." He sent a messenger to find out. It was Ashwatthama who took the message, rushing on his horse. Drona thought, "Though he is fifty-six years old, his eyes are as sharp as the eyes of a hawk, and how fast he can ride. If only he had married..."The very thought of his son remaining unmarried produced a sense of emptiness and silence inside himself. However much he tried, he could see nothing clearly. Again he heard shouts saying, "Good luck to the Supreme Commander! May all go well with our Acarya " It was repeated

several times, rising from countless throats. Inside Drona, there was utter silence. Ashwatthama reported, "Father, it is no trick. The war will now stop and resume after moon-rise. Arjuna has proclaimed it, swearing in the name of your revered feet, the feet of his Guru. I recognised his voice." Drona said, "You get into a chariot and take rest. I shall return to the tent where I can rest better, My body has reached the end of its endurance."

In the neem-oil light inside the hut, Drona looked at his legs. Yes, it was a skimpy body, all bones and very little flesh. The skin had wrinkled with age, resembling a snake's outer skin. The wrinkles looked like a pattern of waves. The bones had aged and hence their joints ached so acutely. On the mat there was grass and on it spread the deer-skin. He blessed his disciple Ekalavya with long life for giving the deer-skin as a gift to his Guru, because it was warm to sit on and lie down on. He lay down on it, stretching his limbs. He relaxed and was gratified that the reduction of the armies through fighting had a brighter side to it. The stench of human defecation and urine had also been reduced as a consequence. Or was it because the camp had been shifted to a different location? He thought, "How pleasant is the rhythmic sound of the cantering of horses." He heard Duryodhana's voice, spying, "If the 'Acarya, our Supreme Commander, were to sleep now?" Drona wondered why the Maharaja had arrived there at this time. Duryodhana opened the door of the hut and entered it. Even in that dim light, his crown studded with precious stones, his necklace, his chest plate, arm bands, sparkled. Drona decided to lie do n, his legs stretched.

He said to himself, "Let the great king with all his decorations stand before me and speak to me!"Duryodhana said, "We have worked out a strategy. I have come personally to explain it to you so that when you arrive on the battle-field tomorrow morning you may not find it necessary to shout." Drona said "Tell me quickly what the new strategy is." He yawned noisily. Duryodhana explained, "Our enemies are all asleep in their chariots. There is dust and mud on the ground carpeted with corpses. The horses, after dropping dung, are also lying down. We plan to take this opportunity to fall on them and inflict great havoc on them before they realise what is happening and run for their weapons!"Because Duryodhana had opened the door while entering, but had not closed it, the wind blew in from outside, making the light flicker. Drona said, "Maharaja, will you please close the door?" He stretched his legs better. Duryodhana pleaded, "You just nod your approval." Drona answered, "A categorical no. I have accepted the temporary truce after Arjuna swore by my feet, that he would keep it!"Duryodhana, "Didn't they lie when they killed our Jayadratha?" Drona replied, "Perhaps they were forced to do it in order to fulfil a vow." Now that the door had been closed, the lamp burnt with a steady flame in the hut. Drona closed

his eyes. He could see the dim, reddish light behind the eyelids, and sense the total darkness that lay beyond. Duryodhana urged, "Acarya, please give your consent formally." Drona answered firmly, "Well, if you think you possess the authority to over-rule the Supreme Commander and dishonour an agreement you had made, you are free to do so." Then Drona turned to the other side, and covered his face with a blanket. He remembered Duryodhana's puffed up face, snub nose, and evil looks. Then he turned abruptly to the other side. He heard the sound of the horses speeding away. He uncovered his face. A chilly wind blew into the hut through the half-broken door. The flame flickered violently. Drona shouted, "Havyaka, Havyaka." There was no sign of Havyaka. The lamp blew out. The pungent aroma of burnt neem-oil filled the hut. Still, there was no sign of Havyaka.

When Dronacharya woke up in the morning, he felt an itching sensation all over his body. Or perhaps it was this itching sensation that woke him up. He scratched furiously. He thought his old worn-out skin did not have the strength to endure such scratching.

Then he remembered that ever since he assumed the office of the Supreme Commander he hadn't had a bath. He shouted, "Havyaka, is there hot water for bath?" Yet, there was no sign of him. He went and checked inside. He was not there. Immediately he realised that only the previous day Havyaka must have left without telling anybody. No, not altogether without telling. Drona recalled that he had made a request earlier for permission to be away for a few days. Yet Drona felt that Havyaka should not have deserted his master in that situation. He felt somewhat angry that Havyaka should have fumed out to be so ungrateful. He woke up his charioteer, Tapana, who was taking rest in the back part of the hut. He asked Tapana to heat water for him. Tapana replied that there was no water in the pot. Drona said, "Get it from somewhere. I have determined to take a bath today." Tapana climbed a horse and went in search of water. He got some water and it was morning by the time the water was heated. Then he asked Tapana to massage his back, adding, "Not so briskly." After bath, he wore clean cloth as it would prevent itching. Then he ordered Tapana to make arrangements for the fire rite. Tapana pointed out that there was no ghee. Drona asked, "What do you mean?" Tapana answered, "They haven't supplied it!"Drona said in an angry tone, "I must perform the rite today. The only place where you can find ghee now is Maharaja's kitchen. Run fast and get it."

When he was performing the fire rite by offering ghee to the god of fire, a very pleasant aroma rose from the fire. He was chanting the ritual formulae, but with omissions due to poor memory. Then half-remembered events floated into his consciousness. He felt somewhat dissatisfied, even disgusted, at the fact that he had to perform the rite

with left-over ghee from Maharaja's kitchen. However, Drona felt gratified that Duryodhana was consulting him on everything now. He thought, "Poor Bhishma. He was scared of asserting his authority. But this Drona is not the one who can be scared easily." After the rite, Tapana brought him gruel. They had stopped the supply of milk nine or ten days back. Drona wondered whether the supply of milk had stopped even for Maharaja's kitchen. The stock of corn had exhausted. Only the honey Ekalavya had offered as gift was still there in plenty. That in spite of the fact that Ashwatthama had consumed countless palmfuls of it! After drinking the gruel mixed with honey, Drona came out of the hut. The early morning sun's heat was very pleasant. It was so comforting that he felt like sleeping in the sun. His hut was isolated from the other huts. In fact, common soldiers, like the horses and elephants, had no definite residence. Here around his hut, Drona did not find the stench of defecation and urine as great as elsewhere in the camp. Suddenly he realised that the time was about two hours after sun-rise. He asked himself, "What has been happening there in the battle-field? Nobody has been here to ask my permission to do things. No report regarding the war has reached me. Consulting me! This is his way of consulting me! He has ignored me. Oh yes! Now I know. He has relieved me from my office, without even informing me. No, perhaps I have chosen to keep aloof from the war, virtually retiring myself from my office!"He breathed slowly. Luckily, there was no stench of animal droppings. The heat was enjoyable. He was now certain that Duryodhana would not visit him any more. Nor would he send any messengers. He began to feel an acute sense of inner emptiness. He was uneasy. He looked into the hut. Then he walked up and down briskly, in the fresh warmth of early sun. But the sense of emptiness haunted him everywhere. He heard the sound of fighting towards him from far away. Or was it an illusion? He said to himself, "Well, I chose to remain aloof. I myself let the office slip from my control. After all, how can a Supreme Commander who sleeps while his army fights, expect to continue in office?"

Drona entered his hut quickly. He ordered Tapana, "Come and fasten my chest-plate."

Tapana, "Well, you had said on the first day of the war that you don't want to don it as it was too heavy for you."

Drona, somewhat testily, "Now I order you to do it. Let the whole world see Drona's prowess as a warrior."

He fastened the chest-plate. Drona became aware of his bony and flat body. With the donning of the chest-plate, his chest looked now projected forward like the chest of a warrior. He ordered Tapana, "Get ready to start soon." Tapana responded by getting the chariot

ready with the horses yoked to it. Then he stored in it a pot of water, after he had drunk a mug of gruel which he had himself prepared. Drona said, "Stock it with some more arrows."

Even the enthusiastic movement of the chariot seemed to proclaim to the world, "You will now see Drona's prowess and fighting, not just his skill in formulating strategy." All on a sudden he was struck by the memory of Havyaka. He remembered what he had said to affirm his loyalty to himself. He asked, "What were his words? He had said that he was serving him and eating his rice, not Duryodhana's. Well, he had said two days back, it is true that I am in your service. Even now if you return home, I shall follow you and serve you. But what is the sense in suffering and getting killed by strangers so far away from home?' I wanted to accuse him as a stealer of life but couldn't. Does it mean that he is right or wise?" Drona did not pursue the answer to this question. His mind was half-occupied with the sounds of the war. He knew that the war was going on fiercely and continuously. Ashwatthama had fallen on Satyaki, and Dussasana on Nakula. They were engaged in a bitter struggle. Somewhere he thought he saw the effects of Bhima and his men. Drona asked himself, "Where should I move? Where are my troops? Yes, I see Duryodhana is close by." He ordered Tapana to take the chariot near the chariot of the Maharaja.

Drona, "Maharaja, what is the present state of the war?" Duryodhana offered no answer.

Drona, "I want a brief report on the current situation in the war."

Duryodhana, "I suggest you go back and rest."

Drona, "I have finished taking rest. Today I want to fight with heroic abandon."

Duryodhana, "Then you may choose your opponent."

Drona thought, "He is contemptuous of me. I shall fight heroically and prove that I cannot be written off."

Drona, "Where are my troops?"

Duryodhana, "Your troops? When did you have a troop of your own?"

Drona was embarrassed. He had no troop of his own, but how did he end up as a commander? He felt as if there was no place where he could stand. Sitting in his chariot, Duryodhana was surveying the battle-field on its three sides, as if he was now the Supreme Commander. Drona felt that he was out of place there deep down. He felt something squeezing him. He asked Duryodhana, "Maharaja, grant me a troop, at least a small one. I must dazzle the world with

my heroic deeds." But the Maharaja turned his face away. Drona wondered: "Is he smiling gently? Is it an ironical smile? Or did he turn his face away to conceal from me his laugh of contempt?"

At last he was given a small band of men, and leading them, Drona was moving about in the outer rim of the battle-arena. He thought, "Whom should I attack? Bhima? No. Arjuna? I cannot because he won't fight me. I could kill these soldiers who are already exhausted. Nakula? Sahadeva? No, how can this Drona fight such smaller fry? Yes, if fight I must, I must take on Arjuna. I see somewhere there in the distance Dharmaraja. Near him is Arjuna's chariot with its white horses. He is still afraid that I might capture his elder brother. It flatters me! I think of all my disciples he is perhaps the one most inspired by devotion to the Guru. Who is that coming this way? White beard, dazzling crown, worn-out ancient visage." He asked his charioteer, "Tapana, what king is he? With whom, on our side, is he battling?"

Tapana, 'It is Maharaja Drupada of the Panchalas. He is fighting Shakuni on our side."

Drona, "That's it. Tapana, rush my chariot and men against him. I have got my quarry at last. Ask the men to shout and act with zeal."

Drona's enmity against Drupada became intensified, boiling and bursting. His enthusiasm reached a high pitch. His body became literally hot. He sent word to Shakuni to leave Drupada as his target. Then he shouted to his men, "My soldiers, hurry. Let's go to perform a great deed!"Approaching Drupada, he challenged, "You Panchala, know that you are facing Drona. Do you realise it?..."He screamed till his throat became dry, and his nerves were about to snap. The fighting commenced, and the soldiers turned enthusiastic. Drona positioned his bow, and drew back the string with all his strength to shoot. The arrow went astray. Drona asked himself, "Whom did my arrow pierce?" He was told that it hit Virata standing close by, and that Drupada was actually a little to the right. Once again, Drona took aim and shot an arrow. The enemy forces rippled like waves. The arrow smashed Drupada's chariot. Drona said to Tapana, "Good Lord, I never thought my shoulders had such power! Tapana, pass on the arrows. I shall not rest till I finish Drupada. My breathing is getting harder..."

Tapana announced, "Acharya, Drupada has fallen. By your arrow."

Drona, "By my arrow? Are you sure, not by somebody else's arrow?"

Tapana, "They seem to be following the norm that equals should fight each other. Nobody else attempted to aim an arrow at Drupada."

Drona thought, "Yes. As the chariot sways like a wave, it is difficult to focus my eyes on Drupada's crown. Drupada, do you now see what is this Drona's prowess in warfare? You humiliated me, once, long ago." Drona was so excited that his body began to get hot within. His breath became harder and harder. The heat inside became unbearable. Sweat poured all over his body. He said, "Tapana, this armour plate is getting heavier, and it seems to squeeze my chest. Take it off." Tapana answered, "Acharya, let it be there till we move back to the rear. You need protection in case son«; arrow may hit you by chance." The inner heat was now bursting out. He couldn't sight the crown sitting on Drupada's head like a pillar. He repeated to himself, "He had humiliated me." All of a sudden he felt giddy, his eyes in whirl. A voice deep down his inner being was saying, "Look, you avenged that humiliation when he was tied to the leg of your cot and he was forced to offer you half his kingdom." A sense of discontent haunted him, as he said to himself, "I should have taken on Bhishma like this. Duryodhana cheated me." He said to Tapana, "Tapana, rush my chariot and my men against Duryodhana. I shall fight him!"The heat intensified. He found it impossible to sit down with the chest plate on. He yearned for a life in a hermitage on the cool banks of some river, any river. He shouted at Tapana, "Didn't you hear what I said? Why didn't you do as I ordered?"

Tapana replied, "Acharya, is it right that the subjects should take up arms against their ruler?"

Drona mused inwardly, "Tapana can never understand." Nobody can. My Ashwatthama, of course, never will. My anger rises and burns bright. I feel like weeping. Men on the opposite side are scattering because their commander is dead. We have won this fight. We have finished one commander and another, Virata, too, seems to have been wounded. If he also dies, we shall have have downed two of their commanders. Yes, something has hit me, right on my right arm. It had pierced."

Drona asked, "Tapana, who shot that arrow?"

Tapana, "Some ordinary soldier. Must be from the scattering troop of Drupada."

Drona, "That is against Dharma. The Dharma of the war is that only equals in status must meet each other in fighting. Did an ordinary soldier shoot an arrow at me?"

After the arrow was pulled out, blood began to flow from the wound caused by the arrow. It was watery and diluted blood. What better blood can flow in this dried up body? He asked himself. He felt a sense of vibration, as if it was filling him. He wondered, "Was that an arrow with a poisoned tip?" A cry of utter anguish was forcing

itself from within. He felt the onset of death. He reflected, "Drona's death from an ordinary soldier's arrow! I remember revered Bhishma. My self-retirement and Duryodhana's retiring me. I want to cry, but the cry is buried in my throat. After all, was Havyaka a wise fellow?" He saw a tremendous commotion in front of him. Tapana informed, "Acharya, Drupada's son, Dhrishtadyumna is marching with his men this way."

Drona saw his men scatter in utter confusion. Dhrishtadyumna was told, that the Acharya had been hit by an arrow and the wound was bleeding badly. In about half an hour, he would bleed to death. Drona felt his chariot sway like a ship on a stormy sea. The horses neighed. He could dimly see him, and he looked in body- build and size the same as Drupada. Drona saw imperfectly as if through a mist, Dhrishtadyumna, a sword in his right hand, Drona removed his head-gear and held between his fingers the scanty hair on his head. His breath was tapering off.

A terrible blindness engulfed his eyes. He heard a voice, coming from another world, speak in a merciless tone, "I know you will die of your own accord now. But I have taken the vow to slice off your head and throw it at your men. You not only humiliated my father then, but now you have killed him." The last thing Drona's eyes could see was the raised sword...

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Chapter

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WHEN he reached home it was dawn. Then he went to sleep. Because the whole town was silent, though the sun had risen so high as to cast a shadow of four men's length and climbed above the branches of the tree beside the house, Sanjaya did not wake up. Tired of waiting for him to wake up, his wife finally woke him up herself. She tried her best to dissuade him from going back that day to the battle-front while his mind was busy, imagining the likely developments on the front. In the afternoon, he finished a hot meal and went back to sleep again. Only in the night he had a little time to converse with his wife.

He woke up very early in the morning, packed his meals for the day and rode away swiftly on his horse. Now the road was not very busy, and there were very few vehicles carrying provisions and goods and men. He realised immediately that there was nothing left now in Hastinavati to be carted to the .front. As expected he reached the stream about four hours after sun-rise. He got off his horse, took it for drinking water, and then allowed it to graze the grass on the bank. He washed his feet and hands, and sat down to cat from the packed food. By the time he finished eating, he saw a chariot coming from the opposite direction. He thought the chariot had stopped to let the horses drink water. On the top of the chariot, he saw a person with his hands and legs bound, as if he was a thief caught while stealing. He had no idea who was driving the chariot. By the side of the bound person, he recognised Vajradhara. He knew him well, as he, too, was from the Süta community.

Sanjaya asked, "Vajradhara, why do you go this way? Who is the person next to you?"

Vajradhara, "He is a thief. He was looting the king's coffers."

Vajradhara's eyes caught the food. He said, "Oh! Sanjaya, „ how many flour cakes have you packed there! Perhaps you have' spread ghee over them. Give me two. Only two, please. May your wife give birth to eight male children!"He jumped down the chariot and sat before Sanjaya. The charioteer unyoked the horses and took them for drinking water. Sanjaya gave two cakes to Vajradhara. He thought

that the charioteer should be offered at least one. But that would lead to a problem as he might not have enough to go round. Then he remembered that he had extra cakes packed for the agents who were to collect the information for him. That was why the package was so large. After he had consumed half the cake, Vajradhara tongue became clear. Chewing the other half, he asked, "Are you going to the front? What are you going to do there? It seems our Maharaja is suffering defeat."

Sanjaya, "Have you any idea what happened with regard to Maharaja Karna's supreme commandership?"

Vajradhara, "It seems yesterday Bhima killed twenty-one sons of Dhritarashtra. All of them from our community. It is true that one should never drink toddy on an empty stomach. Arjuna is said to have killed Maharaja Karna's son, Sushena. Thank God, after eating your cake, I feel that I am fit as a fiddle. My body and. stomach are now all right. It seems, as a consequence, Maharaja Karna has vowed to kill Arjuna. King Salya is his charioteer." Then bursting into laughter, he continued, "Did you see Maharaja Karna's bravado? Imagine, a crowned king, a real Ksatriya king, has become a Süta driving a chariot of our Maharaja Karna."

Sanjaya was consumed with curiosity. He felt personal sorrow at the death of Sushena who was of his age and also his friend. Sanjaya thought that by this time Arjuna might have been finished. Then Vajradhara asked, "Do you know why our side is losing?"

Sanjaya, "Lack of unity among our commanders. Drona and Bhishma...."

Vajradhara interrupted, "Do you know the Veda?"

Sanjaya, "Well, a few lessons or so. Haven't studied as much as you have."

Vajradhara, "Let me tell you. You see, as soon as Indra, the king of gods was born, they let hi m taste the intoxicating Soma juice even before he had taken a drop of his mother's milk. When he grew up, he was capable of swilling thirty mugs of the Soma drink at one stroke. That was why he could accomplish such great deeds. The Veda says, 'You Indra, the Soma after drinking which you are able to kill Vritra and others, that intoxicating and worthy Soma is here. Let it give you great joy.' Now tell me, Sanjaya, can there be a brave deed without ecstasy? And can there be ecstasy without Soma?"

Sanjaya, "What is it you are saying?"

Vajradhara, "Well, this is what I am saying. On our side, they supplied the liquor only on the first two days. After that they stopped it. They argued that it was impossible to provide so many people with

the drink. Can you fight a war shedding fear without the help of liquor? Tell me why our men did not display the valour they showed on the first day?"

Sanjaya did not have an immediate reply. He simply asked, "Why are you coming away from the front?"

Vajradhara, "Precisely for that reason. Any fool who fights without Soma is bound to lose. Not only lose the war, but also his life. Why should I sacrifice my life unnecessarily? Why should I be the victim of Indra's and Soma's curse? So, I left."

Sanjaya, "How did you manage to get the drink now?"

Vajradhara, "On the way. Not exactly. But by the side of the road, somebody had tied a mug to a palm tree, but beyond a cluster of other trees so that it couldn't be easily spotted. The sun had not yet risen. By chance I spotted it. I stopped the chariot and went near it. Then climbed the tree. I have stored it in the chariot, covering it with leaves so that the pot may not break due to the motion of the chariot. I shall give you one mug. Give me one more cake. If you refuse it, I shall drink and then full of spirit fight you and grab the food. Doesn't Soma give strength and courage?" He did not laugh, but sounded serious.

Sanjaya also felt thirsty for the drink. Then the charioteer returned from the stream with the horses. Sanjaya got acquainted with him. His name was Praveera and he hailed from Vrikaprastha. He brought the pot from the chariot. The pot was full up to the neck. After drinking a mug of it, Sanjaya felt light. He looked at the chariot. He asked "What is he?" Vajradhara replied, "I have already said that he is a thief who was trying to steal the property of the king. This vehicle and the horses were also part of what he had stolen. I am taking him prisoner. We shall present him before Maharaja Dhritarashtra, and then get him punished. I shall be rewarded for capturing him."

Sanjaya, "What was he stealing?"

Vajradhara, "Go with me. I shall show."

Sanjaya went with him and looked in the chariot. The prisoner was around thirty years, and he was bound hand and foot. Inside the chariot, there was a heap of metal tips of arrows, and metal pieces from the wheels of chariots. Nothing else.

Vajradhara explained the point of justice involved, "He stole all this from the front. This chariot and horses also were taken from the front. Don't you think his right hand should be cut off for stealing king's property?"

Sanjaya, "First release him. Then I shall give my answer." Then he himself untied the fellow. He helped him to sit properly. He asked him, "You fellow tell us the truth. Who are you? Why did you steal?"

The fellow broke into a cry. Weeping loudly, he said, "I am telling the truth. I swear by my own child. If you cut off my right hand, how shall I carry on my occupation?"

Sanjaya, "What is your occupation?"

Prisoner, "I am a metal worker."

Sanjaya, "Why did you steal all this?"

Prisoner, "No. I didn't try to steal them. I went just to see what war looked like. Between the countless rotting bodies of dead soldiers, arrows had fallen, Their metal-tips were going to waste. I collected as many of them as I could. These strips are from the chariots. From the broken ones. This chariot had also been damaged. I repaired it and got it going. Then I filled it with these pieces. These horses too had become useless for the war, as they were limping. I got hold of them."

Sanjaya, "What are you going to do with these pieces?"

Metal-worker, "Maharaja, it is so difficult to mine and extract metal! I shall melt them and then shape them into bolts for doors, chains, parts for the ploughs. Then I shall sell them in the villages for a living."

Sanjaya stared hard at him for a minute and said, "Vajradhara, let him go."

Vajradhara, "Are you advocating the cause of a thief who has stolen king's property?"

Sanjaya, "If you take him before the Maharaja, he will punish you for deserting the war."

Vajradhara's face sagged. Sanjaya offered the metal worker a cake, and then offered him a mug of the toddy.

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Chapter 75

THE stomach was in agony. He had some vague feeling that if he retched, it would give him relief. Twice he went out to vomit, but the stuff got stuck inside. Chaitya, the sentry at the door, asked solicitously, "What is the matter, Maharaja?" Not wanting to answer, he went inside and slept. He found the blanket warm. The hut was far enough from the front for its noises to disturb him. There was silence and darkness. Inside the hut, there was a lamp with a thick wick burning. The Maharaja himself had provided him with three mugs of the drink so that he could sleep well and be ready for the next day's battle. The Maharaja himself didn't touch a drop, saying, "Tomorrow's battle is yours. You take it because you need it. Sleep soundly this night. I shall take care of tonight's battle."

Karna thought, "What great friendship the Maharaja has for me! But I have a great pain that makes me vomit. It seems this is pure toddy, taken straight from the tree. It has no other smell or taste excepting those arising from being fermented." Though he had a warm blanket on his body, he could not sleep. Ever since the enemies killed Jayadratha and continued the battle into the night, he had been unable to sleep even after closing his eyes. He turned first to the left and then to the right. He was restless. Whenever he rolled to a side, the dog which remained inside the hut would get up, wag its tail and whimper. He thought that the animal was showing excessive love today because it had missed him during the previous five days. He would stretch his hand and fondle it. Then it would come closer and sleep on his blanket. It slept easily. But he couldn't get sleep. In his head, he had the strange feeling that he was floating away somewhere! The agony in the pit of his stomach became more pointed. He said to himself, "Tomorrow's battle will be interesting. I do no t know whether it would be a fight between unequal as it has been so far or not? He doesn't know my real identity. It is a battle between emotions within — on one side, the enormous force of anger, on the other side, the helplessness arising out of deep affection for blood-relationship! Well, when I think about this internal conflict, my anger rises. Kinship and blood-relationship is all a lie, mere illusion. Bearing me out of wedlock, then abandoning me, and now reviving the relationship as part of the war strategy — well what am

I to do now? Is this biological claim of giving birth to me greater than the claims of one whom I begot and brought up, and who after his mother's death had nursed me as a mother, my dear son? He killed my son, Sushena, deliberately, aiming directly at him. It was meant to hurt me where it hurts most! Also to provoke me. Like a boy provoking a python by poking it with a stick! Well, I shall show tomorrow what I can do. Suddenly my heart has turned into stone. It seems he killed him after shouting, 'You, Karna's son, did your father send you to fight me, being himself scared of encountering me? Your father is said to have killed my son Abhimanyu. He sliced off Ghatotkacha's head and then ran away. Now I shall finish you.' Then the arrow from his bow flew straight to Suseshana's neck...."

Karna broke down at the memory of it, and felt like weeping. He said to himself, "But I shall not weep. I am not a woman. Sushena, you are not an orphan. I am not the kind of a father who will let your ghost wander hungry without avenging your death. Didn't Arjuna kill Jayadratha to avenge Abhimanyu's death? No, rest assured, you are not an orphan. I shall not regard myself as your father unless tomorrow I shall engage the whole army, slice off his head, and hurl his head sky-high in the midst of their army. Rest assured, my child." When he announced the decision to himself, his mind attained a level of stability and equilibrium. The physical pain, too, subsided, and the nerves became less tense. Now he felt he could sleep. Karna tried to sleep after turning to the right. He was on the point of sleeping when he heard some whispers outside. He caught the words, "Chitrasena and Susharma? Speak low. Maharaja is sleeping. Let us go there and talk." Karna heard the steps moving away. From where he was lying, he shrieked, "What has happened to my sons, Chitrasena and Susharma?"

There was nobody to reply.

Karna, "Chaitya, didn't you hear? Come in and report to me." After shouting, hi s throat went dry. Chaitya came inside, by closing the door so that the wind did not blow out the lamp.

Chaitya, "Maharaja, in spite of my trying to prevent you from hearing the calamitous news, that stupid messenger..."

Karna, "Who killed them?"

Chaitya, "Your enemy, Arjuna. It is clear that he is deliberately picking your sons for killing."

Karna continued to lie where he was lying. The nerves which were a little while back relaxing, now became red hot. Karna didn't speak. He felt an acute pain as if his intestines were being twisted. Yet he was reaching a state of calm and control. He realised that war meant death. He asked himself, "Haven't Maharaja Duryodhana and

Dussasana lost their sons? Well, I didn't kill Abhimanyu, though that is what Arjuna has come to believe. I am not guilty, but how can I make him accept this. But suppose I convince him that I am not guilty of killing his son. Would that prevent him from killing my sons? Or is he challenging me, saying, 'You have become the Supreme Commander and let me see what you can do as I finish off your sons one after another.' It looks like it. Arjuna, as soon as it dawns tomorrow, I shall attack you. I shall engage you in a hand-to-hand combat. Though I have regarded the other four as Kunti's children, you have snapped that link of affection by sending my sons one after another to the land of death. Yes, I must challenge you to a single combat..."

He tossed on his bed, restless and sleepless. His mind told him that this would be a long, sleepless night for him. As the war was going on even in the night, he was tempted to get up and finish him off before the blood from the bodies of his sons, Chitrasena and Susharma, had coagulated. He sat up abruptly. He wondered whether it was possible to wake up his men now, as they were resting to get ready for the next day's encounter with the enemy. Even if he tried, would they oblige him? Even if they did get up, would they really fight? Realising that only Karna was denied the grace of sleep that night, he tried hard to sleep. Even his charioteer Salya had gone off to get good sleep. He had drunk from the same pot that was there in the hut. Would he wake up and oblige? His enthusiasm for immediate action abated. The stomach pain re-appeared. The same agony of the bile trapped inside and unable to come out. Though he knew that he wouldn't succeed in vomiting it out, he went out of the hut and sat to try again. The night was engulfed in a roaring silence. The tent of the Maharaja there in the distance on the opposite side was also silent, and dark. He remembered the Maharaja saying that they were short of oil. Karna couldn't get away from the memory of his sons' death. He said to himself, "He killed Sushena in broad day-light. But he killed the other two in the darkness of the night, this very night. But how did he recognise them as Chitrasena and Susharma in the darkness? Wasn't it possible that they were killed by some miss-aimed arrows and the messenger attributed it to the credit of the commander? I cannot think clearly. Everything is so confusing." He felt the pain subside a little. Yet when he tried to eject the bile from the belly, it refused to be ejected. But if he went in to sleep, he knew that the pain would return. But what option did he have? He tried to get sleep. Closed his eyes again. The oil lamp burnt steadily. He thought, "Perhaps Chaitya re-filled it with oil. I wish I could balance the pans." But he didn't know how." Arjuna, your mother has succeeded in melting my rock-like commitment and determination. But she has helped your commitment and desires grow strong. If you don't believe me, ask your charioteer, Krishna?" He wondered

whether he should pronounce these words before starting the fight. For a moment he thought that was the thing to do. The next moment he felt that he had totally collapsed. He realised that it was impossible to say these words in the presence of the entire Kaurava army and Duryodhana himself. Thus the idea remained still-born. He saw Chaitya standing right there.

Chaitya, "Maharaja, you have raised the status and honour of our Süta community as a whole. None had done it so far."

Karna said nothing, but rolled to the other side on his bed.

Chaitya continued, "It had been the lot of our community to drive the chariots of Ksatriyas. It seems a crowned king, an occupier

of a throne, a true-blooded Ksatriya, Salya, is going to be your charioteer, to drive the chariot of a Süta!. Thanks, to just one gem, our community's status has been enhanced."

Karna felt proud. Also contempt for the Ksatriyas. He recalled that they had protested his appointment as a commander, saying that if a Süta became a commander they would return to their towns and not fight! If Duryodhana had not handled the situation with tact and skill, they might have left, perhaps. How loudly and

arrogantly the old man, Salya, had shouted, 'Should I now become a Süta to a Süta?' How Duryodhana pacified the old fellow's ego and community pride by saying, 'Uncle, it is the Süta who holds the key strings in a war. Why do you downgrade that crucial role?'

Chaitya, "Maharaja, please try to get sleep. You have a busy day tomorrow. You have to avenge the deaths of your three sons."

Chaitya left, closing the door. Karna felt the hut warm. The picture of his dead son and his career was present before his eyes. He recollected, "How plump and well-developed and attractive Sushena had been as a child! How I and his mother used to hold the child, one after the other, never putting him down and showering him with kisses. When he grew up into an impish boy, how I once beat him for some misbehaviour. And when the father is still young, how he can have the patience to handle gently his first son? I never fondled him as much as I did my next sons, Chitrasena and Susharma. Yet how deeply attached was he to his father! Arjuna, tomorrow, I shall engage you in a person-to person combat. I shall demolish the security arranged for you by your mother on the advice of your Süta, Krishna." He repeated the words some ten times to himself. It seemed to have given him mental peace. Eventually, he really began to sleep.

He had a dream. His three sons, Sushena, Chitrasena and Susharma had all entered the sphere of the sun. It was a world of light and heat, filled with sun's pleasant rays. Below there was a wide

river. On the river drifted a round boat. One part of sun's world of rays had become transformed into a lovely baby, descending from the sky into the boat. He felt that the force of the flooding waters of the river was pushing him up. Then suddenly he woke up. His lips were smeared with spit, which tasted bitter. He opened his eyes abruptly to see. The light had gone out. Was it because of the wind or because there was no more oil? He didn't know. The belly-ache returned. Now it was clear that the liquor he had taken to induce sleep had destroyed his sleep. Of course, he did have a lurking sense that, in any case, sleep was beyond his reach that night. Chaitya had fondled Sushena as a boy. Karna remembered that he had also played with his other two sons when they were boys. He went out to urinate. Chaitya was awake under the warm blanket. It meant that there was no stock of oil in the hut. He tried to sleep, and he pushed the dog a little aside so that he could have better room. The pain did not subside. Not just in the belly. It was now invading the chest and the brain and the skull. Sleep was out. All of a sudden, an idea struck him. He thought, "Suppose I woke up Chaitya, told him the whole truth, the secret of my birth, by making him swear to complete secrecy! Tell him, how my birth took place. Not what people thought. Kunti herself revealed the secret to me in person. What is not happening is a battle between unequals. Arjuna does not know the truth. But I do. Kunti is reluctant to tell the secret to him. For some reason. Otherwise she would have told him. Therefore I do not want to tell him. He has been deliberately killing my sons. Maybe to provoke me or maybe because I had spoken insulting words to Draupadi in the fully assembled royal court or may be because I am Duryodhana's right hand. Chaitya, swear to me that you will not reveal this secret to anyone. Suppose I do this?" He thought such a thorough unburdening of the secret would restore his peace of mind! He thought again, "In tomorrow's battle, either he will die or I will die. In this battle of unequals, would he die? Let Chaitya reveal the secret to none till tomorrow evening. After that..."A sudden chill gripped his heart. He continued his reflection, "Suppose I die. What if after my death Duryodhana thinks that I got myself defeated^and killed for this reason! I can hear my heart beat loudly." He thought he shouldn't tell it to Chaitya. Then he turned to the other side and slept. A slight breeze blew into the hut. But from the crevices in the thatched walls of the hut, chilly wind was creeping in. He thought, 'How cold it is outside!, "He remembered Chaitya. He, wondered, "Why should he sit outside and guard the hut?" He felt like asking him to get inside to sleep. But then it was the rule that while the Supreme Commander slept, he should be guarded. He remembered that farther on there were some twenty to thirty soldiers detailed on sentry duty to guard him. Karna recalled Chaitya praising him for raising the status of the Süta community by having a Ksatriya as the charioteer of a Süta. He wondered, "Suppose I tell Chaitya that I am

not a real Süta at all. What would he do?" Karna guessed that he might bend his head low. He tossed to the other side. He was cursing the dawn for not yet arriving! Then his pain came back. He hoped that if he could vomit, he might be more restful. But he simply couldn’t do it. He heard the rustling sound made by Chaitya as he changed his position to lean against the door. Memory like pain, returned." Both my mother and father never once opened their mouth to reveal the secret of my birth. Perhaps because they had given word to Kunti. They both died, with the secret buried with them. May be I should follow them in not revealing it as long as I live." He heard the sound of the dog rising. It beat its two cheeks with its dangling ears and shook its head. He asked, "What was it shaking out of its head?" He knew that there was nothing to shake off and it was just its nature to do that. After shaking off whatever it didn’t want, the dog came near him and lay down, its head resting on the warm blanket.

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Chapter

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SANJAYA narrated, "... After he sliced the heads of your ten sons and threw them into our army, and I cannot count the number of heads sliced off so far, Bhima fell on Dussansana with his men. Actually, enraged by the falling of heads into our army, Dussasana, his manhood challenged, fell first on Bhima with his men. He shouted at Bhima, 'You beast, aren't you ashamed of killing my brothers who had. no men to support them and claiming superiority!' Bhima turned in his direction and shouted. 'I haven't forgotten how calling us cattle, you danced, when we were leaving for the forest.' Then Bhima began to fight fiercely, supported by his men. I think Dussasana made a mistake in his strategy. Our men came to associate Bhima and his men with the falling of heads in their midst. They were mortally scared of them. Dussasana's men were no exception. They too were mortally afraid of the very sight of Bhima and his men. As soon as Dussasana's men saw them, they scattered in all directions, leaving poor Dussasana to fend for himself. He was trapped. He was surrounded by Bhima's men. Then Bhima himself rushed directly at Dussasana who felt helpless and isolated from his own troop. Bhima approached him and slashed Dussasana's right hand with his sword. Dussasana's sword fell down. Bhima bent down to seize Dussasana by his waist, lifted him bodily and smashed him twenty times to the ground as if he was a piece of cloth being pounded on the stone slab by a washerman on the bank of the river. The idea was that Dussasana would die of choked breath. Bhima's men moved away to make space for their commander to play with our Dussasana's body! They were acting like spectators watching the performance of their leader! Then Bhima put down Dussasana and made him lie on his back. Then he screamed, 'You fellow, I had vowed to tear apart your chest and drink your blood to take revenge. Now I am fulfilling it.' Then he raised his right fist and smashed into the centre of the left chest with the force of a hurricane. The spectators could hear the bones break. By the time Bhima removed and pulled out the chest-plate and the undergarment to deliver a second blow, Dussasana was dead, all movement at permanent rest. Blood began to spurt, red blood rising like a fountain. Bhima's men were around watching. From a distance Karna saw the scene.

Duryodhana, busy elsewhere also saw it.

The entire army, not only ours, saw it. I climbed the top of a chariot and saw it. Scooping the blood spurting from Dussasana's chest with both hands. Bhima drank it thrice and may be because of the salty taste of hot blood, his face looked displeased. His moustaches, cheeks, chin, and lips were all smeared with red blood, turning Bhima's face into a picture of unimaginable terror! There was silence and terror as he shrieked, his face painted red with blood, 'Come and rescue him, if you can, you Duryodhana! Come to take him from me, Karna, if you dare! Come to get him away from here, Shakuni, Ashwatthama, Kritavarma, come all of you, if you are men enough!' Bhima did not slice off Dussasana's head and hurl it into the sky to let fall into our army. It was perhaps the only head which he did not hurl into us. Then immediately he raised his sword and made a sign to his soldiers. They all ran near him and formed into a troop. He went straight to attack Duryodhana and his men. It seemed that they wanted Arjuna to go for Karna. Duryodhana's men who had watched Bhima drink Dussasana's blood, trembling with fear were terrified by Bhima's blood-bathed face. They just couldn't fight. All they did was to scream 'Oh, God, the Raksasa has come.' 'Screaming and shouting, they scattered helter-skelter, falling on each other, tripping each other. They were now sure that Bhima was a Raksasa who had drunk human blood. The terror that Bhima's deed and sight struck in their hearts was ten times that of his son, the Raksasa, Ghatotkacha. Even Duryodhana, utterly helpless, fled. I who was atop the chariot had to jump down in great hurry and run away to save my life. Or else I wouldn't be here to narrate the events to you..."Sanjaya looked away.

In the dim light of the lamp, Sanjaya had not yet looked at Gandhari. In the middle of his narrative she had gone to sleep. Suspecting that she might have lost her consciousness, he went to her and shook her by the hand. Then he addressed her, "Lady, Maharani, are you conscious and awake?" Vidura left the comfort of the pillar and went to her. Dhritarashtra sat there absolutely motionless like a deeply-fixed tether. Gandhari did not speak immediately. She moved a little her hands and feet. This gave some relief to the rest. After a short while, she screamed in utter terror, "You wretch and sinner, you have smashed my Duryodhana's thigh!"

Sanjaya, "Why do you scream like that, Lady? I don't know what happened after Karna died. When I left there I am sure that Maharaja Duryodhana was alive and well."

She was silent. When Sanjaya shook her by the shoulders, she mumbled, "Is that the only vow Bhima had to fulfil?"

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KUNTI spoke with heaviness in her voice, "How could you not recognise? Who on this earth has arms as long as these? Or the wide, full-blown face?" The sound of the river flowing below filled the room in the upper story of the house. In the light of the lamp, Vidura was staring intently at her face. He wondered why earlier he could not see that Karna's face was an exact mirror-image of Kunti's. He wondered even more why, not only he, but nobody saw the parallel. But then, on second thought, he felt that what could not be imagined as a possibility, was never seen as a reality. Then. Kunti said, "Though a mother, I was never in a position to perform his birth rites. Now at least let me perform his death rite..."She stopped mid-way as immense sorrow engulfed her. She wept. But she didn't let herself go, and restrained herself with dignity.

Vidura couldn't sleep during the rest of the night. When the others, not knowing what had happened, slept soundly in the house, both Kunti and Vidura sat in his room, without speaking. Below, the drone of the flowing river. Only the lamp, fed with oil from time to time by Vidura, was awake with them.

In the morning they left in Vidura's chariot. They took Sanjaya as a charioteer as he knew the exact spot where Karna had fallen dead. Even before the winter sun appeared, they were some one hour's distance away from the town. The most astonished at the revelation of Kunti were Vidura and Sanjaya. From the commencement of the war to his death, both had interpreted Karna's action and behaviour in their own ways. They were now re-interpreting things in the light of their new knowledge. Vidura was tormented by the question, "Was it really because Bhisma had humiliated him that Karna kept aloof from the war for ten days, without touching his bow?" As for Sanjaya, he saw why Maharaja Karna's aim continued to be erratic during the last phase of the war. They both felt dumb before the mystery of a war which five sons of Kunti had waged on the strength of the promise of another son of Kunti! All along the route they saw corpses, broken chariots and wounded soldiers who had fled from the field, groaning.

Vidura asked, "Kunti, how did you manage to hide this secret so long in your heart?"

She didn't answer. The wheels of the chariot bumped badly on the bad road. Kunti felt her stomach to be upset. She said, "It has been thirteen and half years since I sat in a chariot to leave Indraprastha and came to live in your house." Then she turned to a side and vomited. Sanjaya pulled back the bridles and halted the chariot. She washed her mouth with the water Vidura handed her in a mug. Then she asked Sanjaya to proceed. Vidura asked him to drive slowly.

But Kunti was impatient. She said to Sanjaya, "Please, drive fast. I am afraid of vultures and crows pecking at his face." The chariot resumed its earlier pace, and began to wobble as before. She spoke half to herself, "Yes, what he said is true. She who cared for them, cleaned up their mess, fed them with breast-milk, beat them in love, asked him a favour for their sake. But she never told them the truth. She never was a mother to him, but he became at last a son to her." Vidura gathered the sense of the chaotically assembled words of Kunti. However, they remained a riddle to Sanjaya. After they had gone some way, Kunti asked, "Sanjaya, did you say that in the last phase of the war, he lacked Arjuna's precision in aiming, and his arrows fell erratically?"

Vidura said, for Sanjaya, "Yes."

Sanjaya, "Yes. I was puzzled. I wondered why the hands of such a renowned warrior fumbled with bow and arrow as if he was a country bumpkin handling them for the first time in his life. To make matters worse, his charioteer, Salya, had used insulting words to him before they started for the battle. You know, those going into the battle-field use words to rouse the spirit and courage of their men. That is how Maharaja Karna shouted words. Around his arrow-filled chariot stood his men, who were ready to fight after the previous night's sleeping and feeding. Most of his troop consisted of men from our Süta colony. He declared, 'Where is that puppy, Arjuna? I shall give away as gift all the ornaments on my body to anyone who can show me where he is hiding! Well, if he finds the reward inadequate, I shall gift away a whole village or a town. If he is not content, I shall add hundred milching cows. If not still satisfied, fourteen lovely girls of sixteen and just come of age.

Soldiers, at least point to me the direction in which I can find him... Isn't it the rule that when the warrior in the chariot utters war slogans, the charioteer must greet them loudly with, Yes' or 'Bravo'? But the monkey Salya spoke words to dampen morale, 'Karna, don't boast with empty words, like a dog barking to inquire about the location of a tiger's den. Where is the comparison between the archery of Arjuna, reputed to be matchless in the entire Ksatriya

world and the skill of one who was born Süta and fit to drive a chariot? Don't you worry. The tiger will eventually chase the dog to kill it.' Naturally, Karna's face fell, his zeal dampened. Because the Süta community was insulted thus, the Süta men in the army became wild. Two of them went so far as to attack Salya by twisting his hand! It was Maharaja Karna himself who pacified them, persuading them to get off the chariot."

Kunti, 'Is this not the same Salya the elder brother of our Madri?"

Vidura clarified, "Yes. He is the person. Foolish fellow who abandoned h·s own sister's sons to fall into Duryodhana's trap."

Sanjaya continued, "It was a mistake in the first place to have made him Maharaja Karna's charioteer. Even during the battle, he didn't give good co-operation. For instance, he wouldn't supply the arrows fast enough. He did not manoeuvre the chariot in such a way as to escape the enemy traps. He would not tell the warrior about the spots where the attack was most intense, advise him to shoot there. Their differences reached the climax when he got off the chariot and left for good. So he was without a charioteer, and you know how willy Arjuna's charioteer Krishna is. Well, he advised him to take advantage of Karna's plight and shoot. And handed him an arrow. He told Arjuna to follow it up with a series of arrows one after another. He also pointed out the target to him."

Kunti, more to herself than to others, "Yes. It was Krishna who arranged the shooting."

On the way, they stopped near a stream to eat. Kunti refused to eat, saying she couldn't eat until her son's body was cremated. Vidura also did not eat anything. Only Sanjaya ate the cake and honey, and drank water. The chariot resumed its journey. When it was after-noon and the sun was clearly leaning towards the west, that they smelt the stench of the battle-field. Sanjaya explained, "The wind is blowing from that side. It is still far away. May be a journey of another two hours or so."

Not only the spot where the previous day Karna and Arjuna had fought, but the whole surrounding space, showed no sign of any living human being. The site of battle shifted from day to day, and it was not possible for Sanjaya, to imagine where the battle was taking place that day. But he was able to locate the site of yesterday's battle. The corpses had not rotted much as yet. But already the army of dogs and jackals had invaded the area. The vultures, not only filled the sky but sat, on the ground, seemed to be enjoying friendly relations with the other beasts. But what astonished Sanjaya was the fact that a number of dogs were strewn dead on the ground. Some vultures also had fallen on the ground dead. Some were in the process of dying.

Sanjaya wondered, "Has the human flesh become poisonous? Or have they died of over-eating? Vidura also asked the same question. They had parked the chariot a little behind. They started walking, Sanjaya in the lead, Kunti in the middle and Vidura in the rear. Kunti's eyes swept over the sea of corpses, searching for just one corpse. Sanjaya suddenly thought he had an explanation for the death of animals and birds. He said, "Be careful when you walk. The poisonous tips of arrows are all over the place. If they prick us, we shall be dead like these animals and birds. So please be careful not to tread on them." He looked back and saw that Kunti was bare-footed. Vidura had foot-wear on. He told Kunti to stay where she was. Then he went four steps to the right and picked up the foot-wear of a corpse. Placing them before her, he said, "Maharani, put the feet one after another so that I can fasten them properly." Kunti did not move. Vidura forced her, "Kunti, please stretch your legs." She said, "May be it is best if I die like this. I don't want to live wearing the foot-wear of a corpse." Then Sanjaya said, "All right. As you wish. But tread carefully, following my instructions." Then Sanjaya led the way.

After going four steps, Sanjaya suddenly stopped and told Vidura, "I had forgotten to tell you something yesterday night. You remember that during the construction of Indraprastha, Arjuna had killed many Nagas. Those who escaped from your arrows, contacted later the Nagas elsewhere and got together a Naga army. They volunteered to join Duryodhana's side. Yesterday it was this army that Maharaja Duryodhana sent with Maharaja Karna. They smear the tips of their arrows with poison. It is not herbal poison, but poison extracted from the mouth of cobras. They first collect poison and then dip the arrows in it. Yesterday, countless men on the Pandava side died hit by these arrows. Arjuna, too, should have been hit by them. They did not shoot him because they thought he was reserved for Maharaja Karna. Therefore, they shot only at his men. Karna was separated from his soldiers because of wicked Salya's incompetent driving. Look at the corpses of men pierced by the poison-tipped arrows."

As if suddenly awakened, Kunti asked, "Didn't such an arrow hit Arjuna even by chance?"

Sanjaya understood her anxiety. He said, "If it had hit him, he would have been poisoned instantaneously and collapsed. But after Karna's death, Arjuna raised both his hands and said, 'Has the dog that advised the humiliating of our wife died?' How could a poisoned person have the strength to shout like that?"

At that time two dogs barked and rushed at them. This incident made Sanjaya realise what a dangerous place they were now moving in. He cast his eyes around. He could find no object which would serve as a club. Quickly he took out his sword and threw it at the dog

which was attacking Kunti. The weapon struck the animal's back with such force that it split it into two parts, and blood flowed freely. It fell to the ground, its mouth, opened to bark, remaining open. The other dog, scared, ran away.

They walked farther. Their ears were pierced by the buzzing of the flies. Seeing the scared dog running away, eight other dogs also fled from them. The vultures with their red, naked throats, black in colour and large in size, sat watching their movements and looking in their direction. Kunti felt a turmoil in her stomach. Anticipating her vomiting, she sat down. But she could not throw up the bile. Just in front of her there was a stinking corpse. As her face was close to it, she felt nausea, but didn't vomit. Vidura bent and held her right arm. Sanjaya surveyed the place. He was sure that this was the plain on which the previous day's battle was fought. But the difficulty was to locate where Arjuna stood, where Karna stood, which way Karna's men moved, the direction from which the Nagas attacked. Yes, he thought, we could spot the Naga corpses. They wore feather-decked crowns, and if they could be spotted, that was where Arjuna should be located. But he remembered that Karna's chariot was smashed, and its horses, bereft of the chariot, had fled. They were hit by arrows. But he found the wretched vultures making it difficult to identify exact spots. They had crowded the sky and then linked it to the earth. All directions got thoroughly mixed up. He said to himself, "Damn it, I can't make out anything in this vulture-ridden space." He remembered that Maharaja Karna's flag had been shot at thrice so that it would provoke him. Sanjaya failed to find evidence of it. He recalled that the arrow had hi t him when Karna had got down from the chariot. Then Vidura said, "Sanjaya, Kunti wouldn't be in a position to stand here long. Show us the spot quickly. Or let us take her back to the chariot and she can stay there. We both can search for the corpse and carry it to the chariot. You know I am not strong enough to carry it. If you bear the main part of the body, I can help you by shouldering the legs or hands." They found it hard going. The sun was already on the point of sinking. Therefore, that was the west. But Sanjaya had not noted the directions while witnessing the previous day's events. He said, "Uncle, I now feel that even if we two came back and searched hard, it might be difficult to find Maharaja Karna's corpse. How can we amidst these thousands of corpses, half-rotten, their parts eaten and disfigured by dogs, jackals and vultures? And the vultures, in particular, pluck the eyes out..."

Kunti whispered desperately, "He had long hands and a very wide face."

Sanjaya, "Don't I know it? Even so...."

Kunti stood up abruptly. Then she looked around. She asked, "Try

to recollect and guess on which side Karna's chariot stood."

Sanjaya, "Let me see. I am trying to recollect, trying to think. But I don't seem to succeed."

Then they began to walk briskly. Treading and crossing the corpses, they examined their facial features and limbs. The way she was walking made Vidura fear that she might fall down, either tumbling or through giddiness because of lack of fresh air in that stinking atmosphere. Sanjaya measured distances with his feet. After they reached the mid-point in one direction, she paused and cast her eyes around. Then she went on seeking broken chariots. She didn't hear Vidura's words, "Kunti, at least wear something on your feet..."She was unable to find, near any broken chariot, the corpse she was trying to identify. Defeated and exhausted she stood like a pillar, more dead than alive. The sun had already gone below the horizon and the darkness was slowly spreading. In that darkness, all corpses shared the same colour. And their faces looked the same. Suddenly she broke down, weeping like a child. Vidura remembered that she had not cried from the previous mid-night when she had heard the news until now. He held her right arm firmly. Sanjaya took hold of her left arm. Kunti wept loudly and so heavily that her chest rose and fell rapidly. After a while she collapsed into a sitting position. Sanjaya spoke, "Uncle, it is getting dark. We may even fail to locate our chariot." Each holding one hand, they walked her slowly towards the chariot. She walked obediently and mechanically.

After the chariot had travelled for an hour or so, they found the stench considerably reduced. Then Sanjaya halted the chariot near a banyan tree. He said, "I have come so far purely by guessing the route. I am unable to identify in which direction Hastinavati lies. We can resume our journey after the dawn. In the darkness we might fall into a ravine or the horses might break their legs."

Vidura listened to him carefully. But he said nothing.

After Vidura forced her, Kunti ate corn mixed with honey, but Vidura ate only corn. Sanjaya, while masticating the cake, got an idea. Very soon the idea became crystallised. After they had all drunk water, he said, "Listen carefully. Don't you hear the noise of people?"

Vidura listened attentively, but heard nothing.

Sanjaya, "Uncle, you are old. Your hearing is weak. But I can hear it. I shall ride on a horse and find out what has been happening in the war today. If I run by chance into my information agents, I shall collect the details."

Vidura's curiosity was roused. Kunti remained silent. Sanjaya asked her, "Maharani, are you afraid?" He could see her white hair

nod "no "in the darkness. By that time the horses had grazed some grass. Leaving behind one horse, Sanjaya got on to the other horse and rode away. In a few moments he disappeared, without their knowing in which direction.

After he left, the darkness became denser. All around them was the plain ground, empty. From some direction they could smell the stench. The dust and darkness hid the stars from sight. The banyan tree was peopled with vultures. At least that was what they felt and sensed. Occasional flapping of wings confirmed their presence.

Vidura, "Kunti, are you scared?"

Kunti, "Why should I be?"

Vidura, "Well, it is dark. There are corpses near by, and the vultures are sitting there in the tree above."

She did not answer, but, after a pause, yawned deeply.

Vidura, "You had no sleep the whole of yesterday night. The whole day we have been journeying. You must be tired. Please get some sleep in the chariot. I shall keep vigil." She accepted the suggestion, and slept, covering herself with a blanket. She got sleep soon. Vidura also began to doze in the sitting posture. In that half-sleep he swam against a host of waves whose significance eluded him.

Kunti suddenly woke up and sat down. Vidura shook his head with both his hands. Kunti said, "Look here, suppose we offer collective cremation to all the dead in that battle-field, wouldn't we be making sure that he too got the benefit of the death rite?"

Vidura found it an impossible proposition. Where were the servants who would take out the thousands of corpses and collect them into one heap? Where could they get the wood necessary for cremating so many corpses? When both sides were locked in a relentless battle, day and night, losing men and running out of men, who would be interested in cremating corpses? While he was asking himself such questions, Kunti went to sleep. But Vidura pursued the matter within himself." It is the responsibility of the victors to cremate the dead on both sides. No matter who is the victor. But this is an impracticable rule. It is not just this battle site one has to reckon with. There may be hundreds of such sites. There may be nothing left of most of them but the bones...." He felt sleepy, and dozed off. He lay down in the chariot near her feet, and covered himself with a blanket.

Kunti, "Now I am not as worried as I was when Karna lived. Not because my other sons may be killed by him. No. It is because my own sons will be fighting another son of mine. Now I have lost interest in the war.!"

Vidura, "Do you mean you are indifferent whether Duryodhana wins or Dharma?"

"No, Duryodhana cannot win now. What I meant was...." She stopped midway.

Kunti did not say more.

Vidura went on staring at her. Then he said, "Don't be afraid. Though I am not a warrior, if the occasion demands, I can drive away vultures, dogs and jackals. The fear of darkness is purely imaginary and mental. I wish we had remembered to bring with us torches.

Kunti said, "After one year in Hidimba's forest, the terror of night had died out in me. Since yesterday I feel that the fear of death has also died."

Vidura kept silent. It was a silent darkness excepting for the sound of the wind among the branches. They both sat inside the chariot like two tethers fixed to the ground. Below, one of the yoked horses was lying down. It stretched its legs. Vidura thought that the sense of darkness would be reduced if they went on talking. But he found nothing to talk about immediately. After a long silence, Kunti said, "You told me about Ghatotkacha's heroic deeds, and about his blood flowing. I feel I am a sinner."

Vidura, "Why do you think so?"

Kunti, "Bhima was passionately attached to his baby, the Raksasa baby. I feared that if that attachment was allowed to grow, he would become attached to the Raksasa land itself. I feared that it would prevent our returning to the true Aryan way of living. That was why I was adamant in separating Bhima from his Raksasa wife and son and taking him away. The baby was so huge. If one took it to the bosom, it was so heavy that it made one's breathing hard. We did not nurture it, protect it. We just brought it into this world and deserted it. Now that child has given back to its father, the life he had given it, and returning for a drop of blood the father had sown, pots and pots of blood. This unfortunate Kunti never saw that baby grow into a man." Her throat felt choked. But she refrained from weeping, as if she was reluctant to disturb the silence of the night. Vidura began to breathe freely. There was no further sound in the tree. Everything was still and static, though the stench continued. Kunti herself was absolutely silent. After what appeared to be a considerable time, when the silence weighed heavily, she spoke in a clearer voice, "The same with Karna, too. Soon after delivery, I gifted him away. It wasn't I who was afraid. They scared me and forced me to do it. May be his lot was to take a little blood from me as he was growing in my womb for nine months! He never prayed for things and got them. Now he bled a potful and gave back to me the life I had given him. Vidura, I

feel ashamed that I asked him to sacrifice himself. My body trembles when I remember it." Her voice had now become so light that it floated in the air, and it sounded as if she was speaking more to herself than to Vidura, Silence returned. Vidura sat opposite to her, staring at her white hair. She said, after a pause, "The strangest thing is that my grand-son Ghatotkacha was killed by my son Karna by slicing off his head." After some inner struggle to piece together the right words to communicate clearly what she had in mind, she said, "I just don't seem to understand things clearly at all. My sons are going to win the war beyond any doubt. It is also my prayer to the gods that they may win. Yet, speaking for myself, I have no doubt that I have been defeated. I cannot share their victory."

Though it was some time after sun-rise, there was no sign of Sanjaya. They could not themselves go because there was only one horse with them. Even that horse seemed to be thirsty. Vidura had no idea in which direction they should move to find water. They used up a little of the drinking water in the pot to wash their faces. Kunti sat watching the vultures wheel in the sky. Vidura's eyes didn't focus on any definite object, but were looking round aimlessly. After a brief interval, Sanjaya returned. The horse seemed to be moving slowly. His face showed signs of being hit by arrows or blows. His hands were in such pain that they couldn't be easily moved. His legs were limping so much that it was difficult to move. In the dust-covered face, his eyes had become red due to crying. He came near, sat down on the ground and reported, "It seems after Karna died, Duryodhana made Salya the Supreme Commander. In yesterday's battle, Dharmaraja killed Salya. Sahadeva finished Shakuni. Pandavas easily destroyed the remaining men and horses. Duryodhana has fled, and has not been located yet. May be he is dead and his corpse lost in a sea of corpses. Or may be he has fled to save his life and hide somewhere. Nobody knows for certain. The Pandavas are searching for him in every direction, everywhere. The Pandavas, too, may be now left with a couple of hundred men, some forty horses and fifteen chariots. It has been a costly victory for the Pandavas."

Vidura, "It means the war is over. Where were you the whole night? What are these gashes on your face and body?" Sanjaya did not reply. He just bent his head low and began to stare at the ground. Vidura asked, "Did you fight for Duryodhana? If you did, I shall not be angry. After all, you have eaten his rice. And his father has showered you with rewards. Tell the truth."

Sanjaya continued to bend his head. The truth was pressing him from within. Vidura urged him, "Speak the truth, Sanjaya. This Maharani is not like your Gandhari." Having been assured that there wouldn't be hostile reaction, Sanjaya spoke emotionally, "I have been punished for my wrongs. That is all."

Vidura, "What happened?"

Sanjaya, "You recall that I left here yesterday night. One intention of mine was to gather information about the war. I was consumed by the desire to convey to the Pandavas the message that Karna was their eldest brother. It was so strong an urge that I literally ran from here, leaving you two, only to do it."

Kunti's face became white as she asked, "Did you tell them?"

Sanjaya, "How could I? How and where could I meet them? I went to their camp. The sentries stopped me and asked me who I was. I told them I wanted to see Dharmaraja. They persisted in asking me who I was. But I told them I had important information to convey. They insisted on knowing first what information I had. I argued that it was too important to be given to anyone below a commander. Then they shouted that I must be an enemy spy, and ordered my arrest. Then they tied me up with ropes. Not only that. Look here/They thrashed me mercilessly with a bamboo staff all over the body. Then they wanted me to speak the truth. Unable to endure the blows I told them the truth, that Maharaja Karna was Maharani Kunti's first son, born to her before her marriage, and that I had got hold of the secret. Then they doubted the truth of what I was saying, and ridiculed me by saying that I was composing a poem. They shouted at me, "What do you think of our Maharani Kunti? How dare you insult her?' Then they began to rain blows on me again. Anyway they didn't kill me, thank God. I began to mumble incoherently. They concluded that I was a mad fellow, and then, after tying me up with ropes the whole night, they let me off at dawn. Then limping I reached my horse..."Sanjaya's reddish eyes began to flow with tears again.

After Sanjaya composed himself, Vidura asked, "All these years Kunti had been hiding that secret in her heart. Karna himself died with the secret. You were asked to join us only to locate the spot. Otherwise I would have asked my son to drive the chariot. Why did you act beyond your limit?"

Sanjaya, "Yes, when journeying back here, I have been thinking about it. May be it is an off-shoot of a professional career as a reporter of news and gatherer of information. It is the sheer excrement of getting news without any thought about consequences. May be I was fired by the typical reporter's ambition to give the news first to the Pandavas and take the credit for it."

Sanjaya sat with his head bent low again. After a while, he continued, "I have now made up my mind to give up this job of reporting. In any case Dhritarashtra will soon get the news that the Pandava heroes are closing round Duryodhana like hunters closing in on a hiding fox. There is no need for me to report this." Then

feeling that he had expiated for his guilt, he lifted his head and faced Vidura's face.

But Vidura, as if to entangle him again, said, "Sanjaya, child, it seems that yesterday's heavy thrashing has awakened your conscience. Taking this opportunity, introspect on another aspect of the situation. You recall that, on the very first day that you started your work as a reporter to Dhritarashtra, I had counselled you to tell the truth only, and not to deliver sugar-coated news. Now that you are sure that the sons of Dhritarashtra are bound to lose, you are adding the flavour of bitterness in your report, deliberately. Just a moment back, you compared Duryodhana to a hiding fox. You even omitted to prefix the title of Maharaja when referring to Dhritarashtra. A truthful reporter should not show such sharp variations in the rhythm of his reporting. Don't you agree?"

Sanjaya's sense of shame re-appeared. In addition to it, he found himself thrown into confusion, mixed with anger. He was confused that Vidura had harboured Kunti in his house, and now at a time when her sons were going to occupy the throne, he was asking that Dhritarashtra should be given the respect due to him. Not knowing what to do, he bent his head low.

Vidura took hold of the bridles and began to drive the chariot. Sanjaya could not move his hands freely, and he had to be content with sitting near Kunti and direct the route to Vidura. The thirsty horses were taking the chariot in a zigzag manner. Vidura's breath became hard as he attempted to control the horses. After an hour's journey, Sanjaya remembered that there was a stream to the left. Then they stopped, watered the horses, and stored drinking water for themselves in a vessel. Sanjaya began to masticate the corn flour cake. Kunti soaked corn in water, and then mixed it with honey. She gave some to Vidura and herself ate some. From there on, the road was so clear that there was no need for any guidance. The route was visible because of the rut made by the wheels of earlier vehicles. The horses ran fast and enthusiastically because it was a return journey home! Sanjaya was dozing off where he was sitting. Kunti moved a little and asked him to lie down in comfort. When she insisted on it, he did so without embarrassment. But his back ached because of the shaking of the chariot, and he sat up immediately.

After another hour or so, when the sun was right on top of one's head, they encountered a large group heading towards Hastinavati. It was a group consisting only of women. They were draped fully right up to their feet, and they also covered their heads with cloth. Vidura concluded that they must be Ksatriya women, because the servant-maids would not cover their knees and arms. There were also old servant-maids carrying small kids. Vidura counted them to be more

than a hundred. But then he stopped counting as he saw some more emerging beyond the tree in threes and fours. They returned after hearing the sound of horses. Yes, Vidura was able to identify the tall lady with her head covered as Bhanumathi, Duryodhana's wife. Behind her was the widow of Dussasana, in full mourning.... They halted, recognising Vidura. Vidura had not first noticed a person in warrior outfit, bearing bow and arrows, with a sword dangling from the waist. After a while he recognised him to be Yuyutsu. He was puzzled because Yuyutsu was with the Pandava side in the war.

Yuyutsu asked with sadness, "Uncle, where had you gone?"

Vidura, "How are you here?"

Yuyutsu, "Yesterday, when Salya's death occurred, the entire army of Duryodhana got decimated. Our side got the news that yesterday they were forced even to requisition sentries for fighting in the front. I was moved by compassion to help these ladies because I feared that our soldiers or those in the armies of their supporters from other lands, might rush into the camp and seize women of our royal household and use them to vent their anger or physical urges. I ran to Dharmaraja and explained the matter to him. Dharmaraja said, 'Yuyutsu, I had never thought of this. Anyway you know those ladies, and I make it your responsibility to reach them all safely to Hastinavati...' And that is why I am here, taking these ladies back in a hurry to the capital. But there were no chariots available in the camp. No horses. It seems they had not cooked in the camp for the last two days. All the provisions had been exhausted. Even the cooks had fled. So only yesterday evening, in the cooler time, we started out. We spent the night under a tree. While they slept, I kept vigil ready with my bow and arrows."

Vidura got off the chariot and stood before Duryodhana's wife. She did not lift her bent head, reluctant to display her plight. Vidura tried to identify the others — there was Dussale, Duryodhana's sister, and there behind was Duryodhana's daughter-in-law, and in this corner, Dussasana's daughter-in-law. He was silent in their presence, unable to say anything.

Bhanumathi, dressed like a queen with a crown of gold and other ornaments, asked, "Vidura, you are not supposed to have joined any side in the fighting. How is it that you are here on this route? Were you with the enemy?"

Vidura, "No. I had just gone to have a look at the battle-field."

Bhanumati, "Who is the lady sitting in the chariot? I was told your wife is too sick to stir out of her bed or journey in a chariot. She seems to be a widow."

Vidura, "Do you mean that lady?" Vidura did not feel like revealing to them the identity of Kunti. But he knew he had to tell eventually as the Maharani would press for it.

Vidura, "She has been living with us in my house, for the last thirteen and a half years. There had been no occasion for her to be seen by you."

Bhanumati was flabbergasted. Now she remembered having seen Kunti during the Rajasuya ritual celebration. As she recalled, then she had looked like a queen mother. But now she looked like a recluse, donning a rough saree. Bhanumati bent her head low.

Kunti said, ‘We can accommodate another six or seven in the chariot. Let those very tired come in."

None of them raised their head. They did not speak. Kunti repeated the invitation, "Come, Bhanumati. Come, Dussale. What is your name, you there by her side? Come, please."

Dussale, trying to protect her self-respect, said, "No. We shall reach our town on foot." Vidura was convinced that they wouldn’t join them. He felt that the longer they stayed the more embarrassing the situation would get. Saying merely, "We shall meet later in the town, "he started the chariot.

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Chapter

78

"MAHARAJA Karna is dead. It seems when the driverless chariot's wheels got stuck, Karna got down to attend to it: Seizing the opportunity Arjuna shot an arrow and killed him. Then our army fell into total disarray."

When the servant reported Salya almost collapsed. He felt bad because it had been about an hour and a half since he had abandoned Karna's chariot and left the field. He thought, "The fellow fell dead. The arrogant Süta had the cheek to tell me to my face that women of Madra country were loose in their morals." It gave him some consolation that he was dead. Yet his conscience began to bite. He reflected, "Of course, it is not right that a charioteer should abandon the chariot in the midst of fighting. Yes, I am guilty. But isn't Duryodhana also guilty of having made a fully crowned Ksatriya the charioteer of a Süta? And how smoothly and sweetly Duryodhana talked me into it! How he weaves a bower of words and arguments and proves convincingly that the crow is white! He greeted me first on the way. From then on he has managed things to reach this pass." In the warmth of the hearth in the hut, Salya rued bitterly at the way he had been used by Duryodhana. Winter had just begun. When engaged in the battle, he had never bothered about the cold. But once he returned to the hut and the sun went down, the cold would start biting. Salya thought that the cold inside the hut meant that the sun might have set. He repeated to himself that he had committed a crime in deserting Karna's chariot. Then he began to warm his legs before the fire. He thought to himself, "This wretched war, God knows when it will end. I should have stayed at home in comfort. I had suggested it, but my son Rukma wouldn't hear of it. These boys, Vajra and Ajaya, too, are like that. Perhaps death was urging them from within. It urged them to join this war which had no connection with their own kingdom. Is this Kuru land colder than our Madra? This is a terrible land. There is no joy here, only monotony, boredom." His feet became too hot beneath, and he quickly withdrew them." Yes it was a grievous wrong I did. And only Karna had the ability to kill that butcher Arjuna who had finished off both my sons. If only I had not abused him and had helped him with the chariot.... had enthused him, saying, "Bravo! Great warrior, take here the

arrows and shoot, "Karna would have settled scores with Arjuna. But where do I have the strength to let the blood of my sons' killer flow, and take the Ksatriya revenge? Didn't he know that they were from the Salya royal family? Even if Arjuna killed them unwittingly, should I not perform my fatherly Dharma? Well, I was a fool. And this fire is no real help. Soon one tire ."

Then he moved away from the fire to squat near the thatched wall of the hut." All right, let me return home and chide my son, Rukma, 'You fool, damn your politics. You made us go and fight for somebody's cause, sacrificing my two sons and so many soldiers.' He felt his back itching." How many days have passed since I had a bath?" He scratched his back with the left hand. He had to squeeze the finger into the armour to reach the skin." Our Hiranyavati is good at it. How deftly she scratched! She would ask, 'Grandpa, is it here?' Then I would direct her, 'No, a little above, a little more, child, a little to the right.' How skillfully she would locate the spot! How she would scratch with her finger-nails! Without sharpness! Then she would pass her fingers softly across the spot. Her fingers had magic!"He said to himself, "It has been four months since I last saw her. How would she look now! How many more menstruation cycles she must have wasted. Well, as soon as I return, the thing to do should be to whip that fool, Rukma. At least four sound blows. His wife is no good, either. She just dances to his tunes...." Just then a servant came and said, "Maharaja, the enemy side applauded 'Bravo' at your act of humiliating Karna and deserting his chariot!"Salya thought, "How could they have not applauded it? Perhaps Arjuna did not know that they were my sons. It was they who, hoping to attain the fame of having killed the greatest archer in Aryavarta, rushed at him and first shot at him. Why should they be so enthusiastic about somebody's war...." He yawned with his toothless jaws. He saw that it had grown dark all around. There was no point in asking the servant to light the lamp because for the last four days there had been no supply of oil for individual huts in the camp. He asked himself, "In what land has this war been going on so long?" Then he called his servant and said, "Neepa, the fire may extinguish. Push in a piece or two of wood. Otherwise there will be mosquitoes and other insects. Get the wood from the wheels of a broken chariot." Once again he yawned, and cursed the yawns for being so frequent. He remembered that he had no sleep the whole night yesterday. Then he yawned again as he heard the sound of a chariot arriving. He heard the shout, "Victory to Maharaja Duryodhana!"There he was, with the Kuru crown, dazzling with precious stones, the sparkling necklace, and arm-bands and wrist-bands. He, too, hadn't had a bath for quite a few days, and his sweat was stinking. He sat on a mat opposite to Salya. The reddish light of the fire in the hut was reflected in his eyelids. The light of the fire was hurting his eyes, and to avoid it he

cast his eyes down.

Duryodhana, "! have not come here, uncle, to apportion blame. You are aware how close a friend Karna was to me. Now I think we can't get away from the harsh truth that you must shoulder the responsibility for Karna's death, Arjuna's survival, and our defeat today ".

Old Salya was totally dis-oriented. He broke under the burden of such heavy responsibility heaped on him. His ears filled with the sound of emptiness. The neighing of the horses outside, the sound of their hooves and voice of the charioteers made a physical impact, without being consciously experienced. After a while, even those sounds stopped. The drone of silence was broken by Duryodhana's words. He said, "I know that there is no use now in fixing blame for the disasters of the war. You have vowed to avenge the death of your sons by killing Arjuna. In today's war, half the Naga army has survived. We have our own army. If you agree to become our Supreme Commander tomorrow and succeed in fulfilling your vow, then your sons will go to heaven." Salya's mind which had collapsed at Duryodhana's earlier accusation now revived. His eyes became direct and focussed. Duryodhana continued, "You may ridicule Karna as a Süta. As you know, I had assigned this highest post earlier to grand-father Bhishma and Dronacharya. Now I appoint you our Supreme Commander."

Salya lifted his neck and looked at Duryodhana. He was unable to read his mind or emotions. All that he could see was the dazzle of his crown in the light of the fire. But Salya himself felt something definite. The nerves of his neck became taut and his throat became choked. He was unable to understand it. Duryodhana continued, "We shall work out tomorrow's war strategy and other operational details later. I shall now go straight to rouse the spirit and zeal of our men and the Nagas who are currently in bad shape, and then announce to Kripacharya, Ashwatthama, Kritavarma and other commanders that you are now our Supreme Commander. If you want, you can take rest now. I shall arrive here with the formal sword of the Supreme Commander and a priest to formally make you the Supreme Commander. Is it all right?" Salya did not understand his own feelings at the moment, and without moving his neck, he sat silent without saying, "Yes ". Duryodhana, sensing the reactions of Salya and smiling ironically, and left. After Salya heard the sound of the departing chariot, the servant came inside and spoke, "Maharaja, this is a great honour conferred on our Madra land. Please don't reject it." Salya, too, saw the point made. He felt inwardly jubilant, "We have won the Supreme Commander's job of the great Kuru kingdom. An office held by such distinguished personages as revered Bhishma himself." The corners of his mouth began to salivate with joy!

The servant returned from the kitchen earmarked for royalty, and reported, "Maharaja, all the cooking provisions have been exhausted. It seems the oven has not been lit since this afternoon. The only material available in plenty is fire-wood, thanks to the broken and smashed chariots. That is what the cook told me grimacing." Salya felt hungry, but there was no way to satisfy it. The servant spread his mattress.

Only two days back he had lost his sons and therefore could not perform the daily fire rites due to death pollution. Moreover there was no ghee for the rite. As he lay warm in the bed, Salya felt a keen hunger in his belly. He recalled the day he entered Hastinavati with his army first, and how Duryodhana gave him ceremonial welcome even on the way. Realising that the mere memory of a feast did not fill the belly, he turned to one side and tried to sleep with the depressing thought that nobody would get anything to eat till this war ended! Of course, one could cut pieces of horses killed in the war, and eat it. But Salya was aware that he was too old to digest such raw meat. One might get stomach upset or worse still, if they had been killed by poisonous arrows, then their meat would be poisonous. Not many horses were still alive. Though he still yawned, his sleep had vanished. Or one should end without food or water like Bhishma. When he thought that he was stepping into the shoes of revered Bhishma, his toothless mouth broke into a grin. But he recalled that despite his years, Bhishma possessed strong teeth. He had forgotten his hunger, absorbed in such reflections. For a few minutes, he had freed himself from all thinking, and was empty-minded and half asleep. After that he suddenly got up and began to wrestle with a problem and a contradiction or rather the same issue taking the shape of both a question and a contradiction. He asked himself, "Why did Bhishma who was well-versed in the ancient Arya Dharma oppose the Pandavas and take the side of Duryodhana? Why did he say that Dharma was on this side? Standing by Duryodhana, assuming the office of Supreme Commander, what great Ksatriya deeds did he achieve in ten days? All he achieved was reduction of Duryodhana’s army to its half. Then he retired all of a sudden, went without food and water, exposed his body to the biting cold, and died. Different people attribute different intentions to him. Some say it was because his mind was with them while his love was for Duryodhana. Yet others interpret his action in terms of a conflict between what was owed to the person feeding and the debt owed to Dharma. Or it may be that they had understood better the nature of a large-scale war than Bhishma?" One thing was clear to Salya. The elevated notions he had entertained about Bhishma when he set out for the war from his capital, were no longer there. He thought, "Well the far-off mountain is always attractive and romantic." Now when he thought of his having stepped into Bhishma’s shoes, he no longer felt

elated. When he turned to the other side he could hear the sound of chariot, horses and men, all indistinct and coming from far away. These sounds indicated that it was not very late in the night. He thought it was not even real night as yet, and then the hunger in the stomach forced itself back into his consciousness.

At that time Salya had the impression that somebody had arrived there in search of someone. He heard a voice say, "Where is the tent of Madra king, Salya?" The voice sounded familiar. Yes, he recognised it as that of his countryman, Homadatta. Neepa, too, recognised the voice.

Neepa came inside, blew the fire, pushed a few more pieces of wood into it. In the reddish light, the priest, Homadatta's face looked joyless. He looked tired, presumably because of the long journey, and his beard was dusty, and so were his hair and dress. Salya, getting up, enquired, "Homadatta, is everybody safe in the capital and the kingdom?"

First the priest blessed Salya and then sitting near him, said, "Well, I have come to tell you about it. I had a lot of trouble on the way. The hooves of the horses were wounded and my own bottom has been wounded. Let it be. I had trouble finding your hut. Thousands of vultures wheeled over my head, and all around, countless dogs, jackals and wolves, and terrible stench..."

Salya, "All right. But what is the news from home?"

Priest, "It has been quite sometime since you came away here with your army. Three months or is it four? And the Trigartas have also been here for about the same time. It seems the Nagas to our north were biding their time for such an opportunity. About ten days back, they invaded Trigarta and the kingdoms west to it. They have conquered them now, and, meanwhile, the ruler of Trigarta, Susharnma, died here in the war."

Salya, worried no end, asked, "What about our kingdom?

Homadata, "It is still in our hands, and Maharaja Rukmaratha is taking every measure to keep it secure. You know that about three-quarters of our army was committed in this war. With you and the two princes, the army came here. He asked me to inform you that you must return with the army as speedily as you can."

Salya, "What is there to return with now?"

Homadatta, "Of course, our army and the two princes, Vajra and Ajaya."

Salya, "You yourself just a while ago talked about thousands of vultures wheeling above your head, and about the dogs, jackals and

wolves around."

The priest remained silent. Salya also sat silent, imagining in his mind the situation at home. He thought if the quarter of the army had not been left behind wisely, the kingdom of Madra would have been run over by the Nagas. The Nagas must have information in detail about our being here, he thought. He recalled with admiration and approval the destruction Arjuna had inflicted on the Nagas, by smoking them out of their forest hide-outs and shooting them as if they were wild animals. He thought, "We, too, have a thick forest to the north." Then involuntarily his mouth spoke, "Do the others do well in the town? Only two days back, Ajaya and Vajra died. The news has yet to reach Madra."

Homadatta, "Maharaja, the rest are doing fine and well. But one incident that has brought shame on our Madra kingdom and its entire Ksatriya community has occurred. As a consequence, Rukmaratharaja has abandoned food and water, and is pining. Why not I tell the truth straight? The Naga predators abducted our princess, Hiranyavati."

Old Salya's face wrinkled with shock, as he said, "Does that mean they lay seize to our palace and city?"

Homadatta, "No. They never came near our kingdom."

Salya, "Then did this girl go out anywhere all alone? why women should go out without security and body-guards..."

Homadatta, "No, nothing like that happened. Let me now tell you the truth. You know that handsome Naga men, bedecked with multi-coloured crowns made of leaves, donning garlands round their heads, forearms, and smearing their bodies with striking colors, used to visit our capital occasionally to dance and please our folk, and, in return, carry back our tasty and delicious dishes. One Naga youth used to visit the palace almost every day. He used to arrive at the back-yard of the palace, play his bamboo flute, and dance, and please everybody. Everyday she watched him with wide and hungry eyes. One day she disappeared. In the morning she was to be seen nowhere. How much searching is possible? The whole day, we searched for her in the forest, on river-bank, and the nearby villages. There was no trace of her."

Salya, "But how did you find out that she was abducted by the Nagas?" His curiosity had now turned into anger.

Homadatta, "On the second day after she had gone, a Naga old woman arrived in the palace in the guise of a fortune reader. Standing right in front of the palace, she declared, "Your princess has eloped with the Naga youth, has now married him, and lives happily

in the forest'...."

Salya asked, "Didn't you arrest her?" The anger, rising in the old man was turning into a desire to take Arjuna and ask him to burn their forests and to get them shot with arrows as they fled from the fire. In his imagination, he saw the raging flames burning all green things and Aryan soldiers waiting around with bows and arrows, to make sure that those who weren't burnt got shot.

Homadatta said, "I counselled King Rukmaratha, The Nagas have sent this woman deliberately to provoke us. If we arrest her, they will have a reason to invade us. Already they have invaded the surrounding territories,' The king agreed with me. I myself went to that woman and said, 'Your future-casting is all just pretension and pretext. Take me and show me the couple living happily. I shall offer you one cartful of wheat-flour, two skin-bags filled with ghee, and one gold necklace.' She said she would let me know her mind the following day, and left. The next day she came boldly to my own house. She said, 'If you go with me tonight, I shall take you there to see. But you must come alone.' I was a bit scared because they might kill me finding me alone. I consulted the Maharaja. He persuaded me to go with her. Well, that night I went with that woman. It was pitch dark. After we left the limits of the town, she took a white band of cloth and tied it tightly across my eyes so that I couldn't see. Then she took me round and round and in several complicated movements so that I wouldn't have any sense of direction and location. By mid-night we were, I thought, in a forest. From there onwards I heard male voices and I thought there were four men now accompanying us. We walked right till the dawn. After the daylight broke out, I slept. They fed me, and provided me with a mat to sleep on. In fact, I must confess that they looked after me very well. But they never untied the band covering my eyes. I was afraid that if I untied it myself they might kill me. Thus after three nights' journey through unknown forests in unknown directions and covering unknown distance, they took off the blind-fold. Before me I saw a cluster of bamboo huts. Everything in bamboo—bamboo utensils, bamboo platforms, and bamboo mats! It was a clean place. It was the same Naga youth who used to play flute and dance at the back of the palace near the door I saw. With him was our Hiranyavati. She had been transformed into a regular Naga woman, with just a piece of cloth around her body painted in bright colours, and colourful garlands all over her. She was looking so lovely. She came towards me and bent low respectfully. She requested me to bless her. She asked that you also should do the same. With her usual sense of humour, she told me, "Priest, please recite some ritual words used in a traditional Aryan marriage.' I saw no sorrow in her face. She was as bubbling with joy as the colourful flowers she was donning."

Salya, "That is enough. She has shamelessly run away with that fellow. Well, we must set fire to the whole forest, including her. Do you know the forest where they live?" The old man was raving.

Homadatta, "On the return journey, too, I was blind-folded till we reached our town. The journey was only through the nights. Maharaja, if one is blind-folded one loses all sense of direction and location. As before, I was made to do thirty turns on the same spot before I was allowed to walk. After reaching the town, I was again asked to do some thirty turns before they took off the band from my eyes. Then the old woman left."

Salya, "Did you have any private chat with that wretched girl?"

Homadatta, "I was never able to meet her alone. Her husband was always by her side. There were also four women. After all, I spent there just one hour. That time included my eating honey dish and a meal. But before I was asked to leave, she whispered in my ears, "I shall see that my husband's people will not invade my natal land. Please tell them at home not to provoke them'....."

Salya's mind was filled with Arjuna's image. He thought, "What marvellous archery! What terrific pace ! What deadly aiming! Even in today's fighting, how the barbarian Nagas from the forest who came to support Karna blowing their bamboo bugles, were shattered and terrorised by the arrows Arjuna rained on them! And Arjuna's men were so enthusiastic, with such high morale. With what speed their arrows flew. They, too, like the Nagas, were using poison-tipped arrows." Then it dawned on the old man who his real enemy was. He said to himself, "The Nagas are bound to try to conquer us sooner or later. Arjuna is the enemy of the entire.Naga population. Well, the Nagas are on Duryodhana's side, and that our enemies are with Duryodhana. I have been an utter fool! A bloody fool! I must right now proceed to the Pandava camp.." Homadatta interrupted his thoughts by saying, "I am very hungry."

Salya did not seem to have heard the words. He asked Homadatta politely, "Didn't you, when you left home, provide yourself with any food? May be some corn or something."

Homadatta replied, "I had taken a full bag of provisions. Not even a quarter of it was spent on the way. When I was about two days' journey away from the front, I encountered soldiers, they were returning to their lands, fleeing from the front. Some four of them accosted me and begged me, 'Pease pass on to us what is there in your bag. You will have earned Dharma by doing so.' Even before I could reply, they fell on me and snatched the bag from me. I shouted and screamed, but to no avail. Then another group of twelve, hearing me, rushed to attack the four. I was happy because I thought they

were going to return to me my bag. Of course, they didn't do anything of the kind. They snatched the bag from the four and then sped away. Before the first four could attack me for shouting, I drove my horse fast to get away from the place. I haven't eaten for the last two days."

The servant came inside and pushed into the fire two more small logs. Salya was wrestling with the question, "Who is my real enemy? On whom should I wreak my vengeance?" The priest continued, "Maharaja, I got to know about the stage reached now in this war through my enquiries on the way. But I did not know about the death of our two princes. What will you do now by staying here? Come, let's go back to our town. Your presence itself in the capital will give us confidence and hope. Rukmaratha can leave you in the capital, and go round in the villages to recruit new men for the army and then train them. Thus the security of the kingdom will be strengthened. Later we may help release the neighbouring kingdoms from the clutches of the Nagas. We shall be more secure."

The old king had now chalked out a path of action for himself. Suddenly his desire to see his town, his son, daughters-in-law, grand-children and subjects, became overpowering. He realised that no matter what a great warrior Arjuna might be, he was, after all, an enemy now. He said to himself, "He has killed my two sons. But Duryodhana depends on the Nagas. I have little to choose between the two sides. Damn this Kuru land and its connections." Then he said to Homadatta, "Let this night pass, this cold and dark night. Your horse will have rested. In the morning I shall manage to get hold of a chariot and a pair of horses. As soon as the sun rises, we three, you, I and Neepa, shall leave here, free at last from this evil place.! Just then his back began to itch. Even as he tried to scratch with his left hand, he remembered Hiranyavati and cursed her inwardly, "Wretched whore!"Just at this time he heard the sound of chariots arriving. Salya wondered, "Is it Duryodhana?" That was what Neepa reported, the arrival of Duryodhana?" Salya thought he must have brought with him the ceremonial sword of the Supreme Commander. He said to himself, "What a great commander Bhisma was? And what deeds of heroism did he achieve in this war?" While some argument was taking shape in his mind, the first person he saw enter was Duryodhana, followed by Ashwatthama and Kripacharya. Salya started pleading, "Look here, Duryodhana, our priest from Madra has brought some urgent message. It seems the Nagas have over-run the territories around our kingdom. Poor Rukmaratha is precariously positioned, as if standing on the head of a pin! God knows at what moment they will attack our territory and gobble it up. The whole Naga race must be burnt alive. For that job, none better than Arjuna. Now I shall go to their camp, and persuade Arjuna to go with us to Madra and help burn the Nagas..." He stopped because in his new-

found enthusiasm he became confused.

Duryodhana, "Uncle, do you think it is appropriate for a Ksatriya to seek help from a person who had just killed his sons a few days back?"

Salya felt as if somebody had blocked his movement, tumbling him. Salya said tamely." All right. We shall not seek his aid. We shall go home. I have already sacrificed two sons and such a huge army."

Duryodhana, "I can understand your sorrow. Let us finish him who killed your sons, tomorrow. After that we can go with the whole army to help free your neighbouring kingdoms from the control of the Nagas. Finally, we shall surround the forests and burn the Nagas alive."

Salya, "But then your army is now nothing but the Nagas."

Duryodhana, "They are there for just one purpose — to kill their arch foe, Arjuna. After they kill Arjuna, we shall surround them and finish them off ...We can later go to your town also. Please, stand up, and ceremonially receive the sword symbolising the office of the Supreme Commander."

Salya did not get up. As if trying to help him rise, Duryodhana lifted the old man by holding his right arm. Kripacharya spoke, "King of Madra, though you will be formally installed as the Supreme Commander, the strategy and operation of the war shall be in the hands of Maharaja Duryodhana. Look at the Pandavas. The person who first assumed the office of the Supreme Commander is still alive. We were far less fortunate. If our Maharaja himself becomes the Supreme Commander, it will create the unfavourable impression that we have none worthy of holding that high office. Please agree to assume the office at least in name. We have none left alive on our side other than the Maharaja, who is a crowned king. Having enjoyed so long the hospitality of Hastinavati, be a good Aryan and do us this small favour."

Salya felt as if he had been stabbed. Through his mind rushed memories and images of his grand-daughter Hiranyavati, the Nagas, Arjuna, his two sons killed by Arjuna, the forest surrounded by sky-high flames. All on a sudden he was seized by anger for Bhishma. Immediately he saw the pointlessness of such an anger. He said to the priest, "Homadatta, you, too, rest for tomorrow. The three of us shall start homeward day after tomorrow morning."

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Chapter

79

A servant-maid brought the news that Kripacharya was back in Hastinavati. Dhritarashtra commanded her, "Go. Hurry up. Bring him. Run along. There has been no sign of Sanjaya." Gandhari was lying down on the couch. After a while, the servant returned. She reported, "He has arrived." Dhritarashtra said, "Come, come, Acharya. Why didn't you come to the palace straight? Where did you go?"

The servant clarified, "He is just now crossing the front- yard. He is tired, and has no strength to walk fast."

He arrived, and greeted the king, "Long live the Maharaja!"Soon after saying this, he crumbled down to sit.

Dhritarashtra, "Acharya, you must have come from the front. I am dying to get news of the war. Please tell me all that you know."

The Acharya was quite tired. Trying to manage his hard breathing, he said, "I have a very important piece of news, but I don't have the strength to narrate it. I haven't eaten for the last three days. In our war camp, the kitchen oven hasn't been lighted for the last four days."

Dhritarashtra, "My daughters-in-law have told me about it. Acharya, were you ever starved under the patronage of this palace? Now what a terrible plight has overtaken us." His voice became thick. He continued, "Since yesterday, nobody has been able to eat anything in the palace. Even if you comb the whole of Hastinavati, you will not find a grain. I had despatched some servant-maids to neighbouring villages. What vile wretches these village folk are! They told them, 'You are king's representatives, please come in, see for yourselves if we have anything.' Then they showed them round. Then they said, 'Whatever we had, has been looted by King's men. We have been reduced to daily starvation. Please grant us something from the royal stores, so that our children may survive.' Now tell me, Acharya, do you think people claiming to be starved will be strong, hale and healthy like them? The truth is that they have stored and hidden their grain in the forest, digging a hole and then covering it with

leaves and thorns so that nobody can get at their grain. None is as treacherous as our people—real traitors. I think our entire population consists of traitors. All the people of our Kuru land which our ancestors have built up with such diligence and devotion, are traitors. Don't you think so, Acharya?"

Acharya remained silent. The Maharaja said, "The main problem before us today is how to sow the seeds of patriotism in our people's hearts. Don't you think so?"

Acharya, without intending to be ironical or sarcastic, replied, "Maharaja, my problem right now is to get a fistful of rice to fill my starving belly. It was because of my patriotism that I spent eighteen tough days in the war. This morning when I returned from the front, I checked my stock of food grains. Before I left for the front, I had left some corn flour and jave grain. The rats have smashed the earthen vessels containing them. They have made holes into the walls during my absence for a month. If one rain were to fall, I am sure the whole house will come down. What is going to be my fate at this advanced age?"

The servant-maid who was standing close by motioned to Acharya to follow her, and left noiselessly. He quietly followed her. She whispered in his ears, "Please, give the Maharaja some news. I am also eager to hear it. After that I can take you home and offer you cooked roots. My daughter-in-law has brought them from the forest after some searching. But keep it a secret."

Acharya's face oozed gratitude. He blessed her, "May your lineage grow and flourish." Then Acharya returned to the room. Dhritarashtra asked, "Where did you go?"

Acharya lied, "I went to empty my bladder."

Dhritarashtra, "Give me the news about the war." Then he ordered the servant to offer the Acharya a mug of water, adding, "At least, let him narrate the developments in the front after drinking water."

Acharya, "Should I begin at the beginning?"

Dhritarashtra, "No, no. I know about the death of Karna and Dussasana. And then I heard that Shakuni and Salya died. What happened next?"

Acharya, "After the deaths of Shakuni and Salya, there was no further war. What was there to fight with? Any army, chariots, horses, elephants or anything?"

Dhritarashtra, "Was Duryodhana caught by the enemies?"

Acharya, "I shall narrate what happened to him."

Dhritarashtra, "They didn't kill him, or did they?"

Acharya, "No."

Dhritarashtra, "Then please give us the details. Lady, Queen Gandhari, they didn't kill Duryodhana, the Acharya says. He has survived. Listen to him. Our line has not been totally wiped out."

Gandhari sat up. The servant brought for Acharya a handful of the jaggery and a mug of water. After consuming them, the Acharya gained enough strength to narrate the developments in the final phase of the war: "Well, Maharaja Duryodhana kept out of enemy's sight, hiding somewhere. Poor fellow, what else could he have done? After the deaths of Shakuni and Salya, the enemies surrounded us and decimated our entire army. Not a single soldier of ours was left alive. Not a horse was alive. They set fire to our camp. The few arrows in our camp got burnt to cinders. The only survivors were a few personal servants of the Maharaja who had not engaged themselves in fighting and a few old persons, some four or five perhaps. The enemies went scouring the battle-field, starting from some direction. On their side, the survivors were the five Pandava brothers, their five sons, Krishna, Dhrishtadyumna, Satyaki and some hundred or so soldiers, twenty or thirty chariots, sixty or seventy horses. The search party comprised all the surviving warriors, soldiers and animals. They were searching for Duryodhana, to check whether he was dead. They were convinced after the search that he must have fled. I have already said that they set fire to our camp. From there they rushed to the east. I had not drunk even water. Without bath for days my body was itching. So I thought that I should dip into the lake nearby even though it was chilly. I wanted a bath very badly. Thus I was going towards the lake. I was about to reach the lake when the Pandava party was there. Not as one group, but like a hunting party converging on the quarry. Some soldiers thought I was Maharaja Duryodhana. They rushed towards me and caught me. By that time Dharmaraja reached there on a horse. He recognised me and asked me, 'Acharya, what are you doing here alone?' I did not hesitate to beg for my life. I said, 'Victory to you, Dharmaraja! You have, performed the Rajasuya rite. I joined your enemy because of the obligation to discharge the debt owed to one whose rice I had eaten all my life. Now that you have caught me alone, I beseech you not to kill me.' Dharmaraja replied, 'Acharya, you might have fought. I am sure you could not have killed even a single one of our soldiers! Nor made even one horse confused and directionless. Moreover you were our first Guru in archery. Please tell me truthfully where is Duryodhana hiding himself now?' I answered him, 'I swear by the holy Vedas that I really do not know.' By that time Bhima and Krishna also came there. Arjuna, too, joined them. Arjuna touched my feet and bowed to me. After that, all of

them stood around the lake in half-circle. One by one by turn they heaped abuse on Duryodhana, shouting, You frightened dog, why are you crouching and hiding in the lake? If you are man enough, come out.' Even common soldiers used most crude and abusive language against the Maharaja. Till then I had no idea that there were so many abusive words in our language! I was totally surprised that Maharaja Duryodhana was, in fact, hiding in the lake. In the centre of the lake there was a small knoll covered with trees. He was crouching between the trees. Unable to endure the barrage of abuses, he came out of his hiding. Holding a club in his hand, he walked through the water to show himself up. His crown dazzling, his golden arm-bands shining, and his chest-plate wet. Walking through the chilly water made him shiver with cold.

Dharmaraja asked him, 'You eunuch, though born a Ksatriya how could you hide like a thief?' Duryodhana replied, T was not hiding like a thief. I was resting to be ready for the final assault. I am now ready to fight. But I am one. You are so many. Moreover you have so many soldiers, horses and chariots. Aren't you ashamed to come here with so many men and equipment to fight just one person?' Dharmaraja thought for a moment and then said, 'All right. I shall be generous to you, which you don't deserve. Pick any one of us for a single-handed combat. If you can win the contestant of your choice, I shall admit our defeat and proclaim you the victor.' Then Maharaja replied, 'Is that so? Will you keep your word?' Then Krishna intervened immediately, chiding Dharmaraja, 'Dharmaraja, haven't you shed your gambling mentality yet? The enemy has had long and good rest. If he were . to invite you to a combat, do you think you are his match? What do you mean by assuring him that victory in this one encounter will be taken as an overall victory in the war? Is it your idea to forego the fruits of your hard-earned victory and then go to the forest in exile again after surrendering your kingdom to him, to go unfed and unclothed? Are you in your right senses?' Dharmaraja looked confused and stupid. Bhima who had been till then squatting on the ground, stretching his legs, suddenly stood up and said, 'Heed me clearly, Krishna. Weare prepared to put him on the throne for the sole reason that he vs our eldest brother. That is all. He will have no role in the administration or the management of the treasury. Just because we gave him the respect due to an elder brother he gambled and brought us to this plight. We shall no longer tolerate such wilful damage to our interest. I declare that we do not regard ourselves bound by the deal he has just made with the enemy.' At this Maharaja Duryodhana's face became pale. Krishna spoke, 'Even if each person here were to throw a stone each of you will be finished like a mad dog. But we are warriors. Fight single handed with us, one at a time. Bhima's vow to smash your thigh is still there. Would you like to fight with him? In any case, he too, is

wielding a club in his hand.' Duryodhana replied, 'Krishna/i am a Ksatriya. This wicked fellow is strutting with arrogance because he has killed my brothers. Now I have a chance to kill him. Tell Bhima, to fight single-handed with me.' He didn't want to speak directly to Bhima as he thought it was beneath his dignity to do so."

Dhritarashtra, "Quite right. After all my son is an incarnation of the dignity of the Kuru lineage itself."

Acharya continued, "Bhima then took out his club. With one jump, he stood before Maharaja Duryodhana. Then he stared straight into his face, as if he wanted to engulf the Maharaja by his sight alone. Not for a second or two, but for a few minutes. Everybody was waiting for the great fight to start, holding their breath. All of a sudden, Bhima threw his club on the ground. Then he said, 'He is already dead. Look at his death-pale face. Krishna, he really left this world a few days back. His eyes are filled with the darkness of death. Anyhow, he has reached the bank. He will have to perform his own death-rite, having lost all his sons and grand-sons. How can a person like me fight a fellow like that? Let us all go from here. The war ended yesterday itself.' He immediately walked away briskly. Krishna shouted, 'Bhima, what about your vow?' Bhima walked faster, saying, 'It has no meaning now!' Nobody could make head or tail of what he had said. The whole group stood like so many stone pillars. After a pause, Krishna left and went after Bhima. Dharmaraja followed Krishna. The others walked in single file."

Dhritarashtra, "Lady, Gandhari, did you hear? Bhima may be wicked. Not brave. He does not have the guts to stand up against your son and fight him. Duryodhana, you committed a mistake. You should have provoked him to the fight and killed him. At least as a mark of respect for the orphaned heads of so many of your brothers. Anyway, we won the war, didn't we, Acharya?"

Acharya indicated to the servant-maid his stomach, and made signs. She got up to go and signalled with her fingers that he should follow.

Dhritarashtra, "Acharya, Where are you going? Is your reporting over?"

Dhritarashtra heard Acharya's words coming from beyond the threshold, "I have an urgent need to clear my bowels. I am hurrying off to the river bank. I shall finish the report after I return."

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Chapter

80

AFTER a while, in the dense darkness, Duryodhana entered the lake. In the waist-deep waters, he bent down to meet his own image, dark in colour. He felt that not only his face, nose and the crown, but also the sheen on his eyes, had all turned to black like the night closing in on him. He cast his eyes around. As he saw darkness everywhere, he was puzzled as to how the waters of the lake could reflect his figure. The irony amused him. His thirst was so great that he wanted to drink up the whole lake. He bent down to scoop a palmful of water. He reached the water to his lips, but he was haunted by the uneasy feeling that it could be the ritual offering of water to his own departed soul! He began to count the dead. His grand-father was dead, brother Dussasana was dead, and also dead were the other brothers, his sons, brother-in-law Jayadratha, Dronocharya, Karna with his sons. He asked himself." Who will offer the ritual water to their departed souls? None but I." So, he thought he must perform the death rite to all of them. He decided, "Not tonight, not now." But there was one impossible issue beyond his own ability to resolve, "Who will offer the ritual water to my soul?" There was yet another problem. He did not know the ritual words needed on the occasion. Without his knowledge or effort, the water so close to his lips slipped between the fingers. He pulled his legs out of the water and waded to reach the bank. It was so dark. And the ground was so slushy that his feet could have easily got stuck in it. After he had taken some thirty steps, he felt that he tumbled against something. He remembered it. He bent down to pick it up. Well, it was his own club. He saw it when he bent down. It was another club. He picked it up also in his hand. It weighed heavier than his own. But there was a terrible stink, nauseating stink. He passed his hand over it and then sniffed. It was smeared with coagulated blood, not just human but also the blood of horses and elephants. The stench was from that blood. It was made of metal, with a long handle. Dangling his club over the left shoulder, he gripped the other club firmly, swung it forcefully four times, felt it heavy, remembered that he had not eaten for two days. He did not know where to go now. Nor what to do. He said to himself, "At least until the evening I was somewhere and doing something — crouching and in the lake!"Now he had no need to hide. But that did

not help him to know where to go. He was in a fix — he did not need to hide but he had nowhere to go. He felt disgusted with himself, as a sense of utter emptiness invaded the space within himself. He stood still for a while. Then carrying both the clubs he turned to the right. Despite the darkness he could make out vague outline of things. A little distance from there, as he stopped slowly, he touched ashes. He thought, "Yes, this is the spot. This was where the bed of arrows was made. He told me, the fellow in charge of the job, that a cartful of fuel-wood from the kitchen,good dry wood, had been used to cremate grand-father. Why should he lie? The same spot all right. How long ago was it? Everything getting mixed up with everything else. Yes, I recall his words, 'If before I die, you accept them as your brothers, I am prepared to negotiate peace with them. After that, even if you scream to high heavens, stretching your hands to the skies...' Well, it must have been eight days back. Which world will a spirit reach in eight days? No, it seems it stays in the place of death until the proper offering of ritual water is performed. Yes, it stays in the sky above the spot of death. Then he lifted his face to look at the sky. He could see nothing. It was total darkness. No matter how keenly the eyes looked, nothing was visible in that darkness. Not a vulture, dog, to be seen. He wondered for how many days the vultures fed on the flesh after death. He did not know whether this question was the result of curiosity or fear or what else? Deciding not to stay on the spot of death, he walked away briskly. Even in that dense darkness he spotted two thin ruts on the path, marked by the wheels of chariots. He remembered that he had taken this route that day when visiting Bhishma and had also returned by it. He felt somewhat elated that he had at last found some route. Yet, he did not know where it might take him eventually. He felt that it was better to move than stand still. Then he started walking stepping slowly between the ruts on the road, carrying two clubs. As he proceeded further, he suddenly had the impression that a part of the deep darkness had solidified, rising up to the sky, obstructing his path. He was terrified and his heart shook. He raised the club, as if to smash. Immediately he realised that he had lifted the stinking club, and not the one that belonged to him. Then he shifted it to the left hand while shifting his own club to the right hand. But then he had a second thought. He felt that it might be more appropriate to use the blood-smeared club, which had drunk so much blood, on this occasion, than his own club. He thought the heavy, blood-smeared club would strike terror in an opponent. Thus he changed the position of the clubs, the stinking club now back in his right, striking hand. He felt suddenly ashamed. And once again changed the position of the clubs. By that time he had realised that what stood in his way was the giant banyan tree. He remembered how he had earlier surveyed the entire battle-field sitting on this tree. Then he brought the club down to a resting portion on his shoulder. He raised his neck and looked up. He

didn't see any vultures. Or was it because it was too dark to see? He recalled that on that day the dark clouds themselves had seemed to have become vultures or perhaps the darkness of the night itself had turned into vultures. He felt like climbing the tree to see. But immediately he remembered that it was difficult to climb down. He also realised that even if he climbed up to the highest branch the darkness would still continue to prevent him from seeing things. Then he heard some sound in the tree. The sound suggested something climbing down, down from the height of darkness. A sudden chill passed through his heart as he shivered with fear. Then it seemed to spread and begin to fall on his body. Then he realised it was the wind shaking the leaves down. It was not just wind, but a storm, a whirlwind. The tree shed virtually all its leaves, drowning him in leaves. He was gripped with the fear that the tree itself might fall on him. No, he was sure that the tree stood there, rooted firmly. As the leaves fell making a swishing sound, he moved forward briskly. He moved fast as if he was desperately fleeing from the dark huge tree raining countless leaves. He left the swishing sound and the tree far behind to melt into the darkness. Now he merely felt the storm without the leaves. His mind became light at the thought that he was no longer under the failing leaves. But the stench began to hit his nose. He wondered which day of the war was fought on this site. He wanted to run away from there, but he gave up the idea when he realised that the stench would never desert him no matter where he went. If he went back, he would be back under the tree, and if he went forward the stench would only intensify. Yet he decided to go along the route that stank. At a little distance from him ahead he saw two large eyes, burning red, speaking the words, 'Maharaja, Maharaja,' in a loud voice. Holding both the clubs in his left hand, he touched his head with the right. He said to himself, "Yes. My crown is intact." But a sharp fear gripped him. He wondered, "Who is calling?" He listened with concentration. Far away, he saw two bigeyes, widely separated from each other. He asked, "Could it be a ghost?" Then he looked around. In the right corner he saw one big eye moving. He heard no sound. No shouting. On the left there was nothing but darkness spread out like a hill. Duryodhana thought, "I must get away from here and go somewhere. This is a land of corpses. If I go back there is that huge dark tree raining leaves. If I stand still, these two eyes at the distance stare at me, while ghostly voice between them utters, 'Maharaja, Maharaja.' I am trapped for life or death." His body trembled. The two clubs fell down. All of a sudden he felt that he was his own ghost Some terrible sorrow at losing something, made him weep Loudly. Just then he heard two clubs hit each other with a clang. Both the clubs were of metal. Immediately he bent down and recognised his club, and picked it up. He began to hit repeatedly with his club the other club, blood-smeared, blood-drinking, and full of stench. The clanging produced by his action

restored some of his courage, driving away his fear. He began to hit harder and harder, shouting, "I am not dead. I shall not die without killing you." Then he sensed the movement of a ghost coming from the opposite direction. He shouted to it, "You spirit of the dead, why did you come? You cannot scare me. I am not dead yet."

"Why are you smashing these clubs?"

"First, tell me who you are."

"Of the same occupation as yours, "speaking so low as to be virtually impossible to identify.

"A. warrior?"

"Are you too a warrior?"

‘1 don’t want your ghost-fashion answers. Tell me what your occupation is without ambiguity. Do the spirits have different occupations?"

"Sir, I am a metal-worker. I am just collecting the metal pieces strewn all over the battle-field."

"I am not afraid of death. I shall not die."

"But you didn’t tell me who you are. Well, as you please." Then the figure moved away.

Duryodhana continued to smash the blood-smeared, blood-drunk, stinking club with his own club ferociously. The two eyes in the distance moved away, merging into darkness. The cold disappeared and the body suddenly hotted up. The clanging sound stopped.

After a considerable time, the metal-smith came back to that spot. He found two, heavy clubs made of metal, one laid on the other. He tried to lift both simultaneously, but could not. First he lifted the one on the top and rested it against his shoulder, and then walked away with ease, sure of his way in that darkness. After walking for a considerable distance, he reached his cart. He heaved the club into his cart. He went back to pick up the second club, wading through the corpses. He found the second club far beyond his strength. On the way, he had to put it down at least four times to take his breath. As he pushed the club into his cart, he felt as if he had got hold of a big treasure. Fearing that it would get too late, he drove away fast in his cart, prodding the bullocks.

After some time, daylight appeared to be breaking out. A little later, it was morning. The road was unpeopled, and there was no traffic. He drove the cart, trying hard to keep awake. Then on the way he stopped near a tree, and got down to collect leaves and grass. Then he covered the metal pieces he had collected among the corpses with

the leaves and branches. When he resumed his journey, he saw big vultures moving in the sky. When he was watching them, curious to know the direction of their flight, he saw a giant vulture carrying in its beak an object which was dazzling in the day-light. He stared intently at it and discovered that it was a crown. It was flying low. Soon it flew higher and after reaching a great height it began to wheel round. The metal-worker passed on.

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Chapter

81

DHRITARASHTARA, "Acharya, your voice has become clearer. Did you have anything to eat?"

Acharya, "Where do I get it Maharaja? I just drank Ganga's water. That's all."

Dhritarashtra, "What happened next, tell me? You had said that Bhima was too scared to fight with my son and fulfil his vow, and that all of them followed pusillanimous Bhima. What next?"

Acharya, "I too was with them when they followed Bhima...."

Dhritarashtra, "Why, did you switch your loyalties?"

Acharya, "No, no. I merely wanted to find out where they were heading and what they were doing. They were all pretty exhausted. There was sleep waiting in their eyes. They all went straight to their tents and huts. On the way I slipped out of the group, and, unable to walk further, sat down to take rest. After a long time, I saw moving in my direction Ashwatthama and Kritavarma of the Yadavas. It was already dusk. I spotted them first and called out their names. They came towards me and asked me, 'Where is the Maharaja?' I told them what I knew. Poor Ashwatthama, unable to contain his sorrow, shouted, 'No. How can the Maharaja die when we are all there? How can the war be said to end? Come, let us proceed to the Maharaja, and work out our future strategy.' Then we three went back to the lake. We searched everywhere but found no sign of the Maharaja. We returned to our camp, and improvised three torches, from straws covering the huts. Then we lighted them and searched in the areas where the battle had taken place. We called out, 'Maharaja, Maharaja.' I and Kritavarma went in one direction, and Ashwatthama in another. We couldn't find him.."

Dhritarashtra, "Didn't you find him in the end?"

Acharya, "No. We didn't."

Dhritarashtra, "Then where did he go? Did he go to get armies from friendly rulers? From the Nagas? Raksasas? Pisacas? Gandharvas? Or Kinnaras?"

Acharya, "I just don't know."

Dhritarashtra, "Yes, I know. He has gone on such a mission. The ultimate victory belongs to Dharma. All right. What happened next?"

Acharya, "The three torches we had taken got burnt out. You know when a torch suddenly goes out in the dark, darkness appears deeper. I had never before experienced such a subterranean darkness. I said, 'Kritavarma, let us sit here. I can't see anything.' By that time Ashwatthama joined us. I could identify him only by his voice. He came with decisive, clear steps. As soon as he came, he told us, 'W& can resume the search for our Maharaja later. A new idea has struck me. You said that they claim that the war is over. Hence they would all now be taking rest, relaxing. Perhaps the five Pandavas will be sleeping at one place. Let us go stealthily in the night, and slice off their heads. Also Dhrishtayumna's head, and that is very important for me. He was the butcher who killed my father.' Somehow I was not happy with the idea...."

Dhritarashtra, "What was wrong with it?"

Acharya, "It is not right to take unawares and kill sleeping persons. It is against Ksatriya Dharma, I told Ashwatthama. He countered by saying that he was not a Ksatriya. Then Kritavarma argued, 'You are a Brahmana. Would it be Brahmana Dharma to kill sleeping persons?' Ashwatthama replied, 'I am not interested in sterile debate. The important thing is to win the war. Just join me without arguments.' He dragged us by our arms. It was pitch dark. Only Ashwatthama could walk with confidence in such darkness. My heart beat fast. Kritavarma used to trail behind. We walked all the way to the tent of the Pandavas. Everybody was asleep. And what loud snoring there was! The tents of the kings were on the other bank. We crossed the rivulet on a rafter. Then Ashwatthama went to the Pandava camp. For about half an hour, we heard nothing. After some time, there was pandemonium, shouts and screams. Ashwattama ran towards us with a sword in his hand. It was dripping blood, some of which fell on me. Immediately we started rowing the rafter. There on the bank, there were shouts of 'Catch him. Run after him.' In spite of all this noise and commotion, the soldiers sleeping on the bank we reached did not wake up. We could easily manage to cross the rivulet and arrive here safely. The running had made my breath short. After all, at my age how much can one run?"

Dhritarashtra asked enthusiastically, "Anyway did he kill six persons?"

Acharya, "Just wait, I am coming to that. After we ran some distance, Ashwattama left us and ran off somewhere. Nether I nor Kritavarma knew where. But we two began to run. He stopped

suddenly, took a breathing pause, and said to me, ‘Acharya, I came here from Dwaraka with a huge army. All my men were killed leaving me the sole survivor. Now Ashwattama has killed the Pandavas. They have left with them Krishna and Satyaki, both from Dwaraka. They have a little army left. In this darkness they may not catch us. But in the morning the first thing they do would be to search for us. Don't they know that we three are the only survivors on Duryodhana’s side? I shall start running again. I shall somehow try to reach Dwaraka and seek refuge with Balarama.’ Then he ran off. I don’t know in which direction. It was absolutely dark. And my eyes were, after all, weak eyes of an old man. At my age was running possible? I just sat down there. I felt like sleeping there itself. But I did not, fearing that exposure to that biting cold would mean certain death for me. Remember, Ashwatthama killed them though they were asleep. I was disgusted with the level to which my nephew had fallen..."

Dhritarashtra, "Acharya, doesn’t the killing of our enemies give you joy?" He was quite angry with the Acharya.

Acharya, "Yes. I shall tell you. There should be a method iq * killing, and norms to be obeyed. I was sitting there for a short while, looking at the Pandava camp. After some time I saw the movement of torches on the other bank in the Pandava camp. There were perhaps ten torches. They left in search of us, in different directions. One torch-carrying searcher came in my direction. I stood up. The one who was coming towards me was Bhima! My heart shook with fear. But I had no reason to fear Bhima.’ Because he was not my enemy. After all, wasn’t he my student in the beginning? But the cause of my fear was that if Ashwattama had sliced off the throats of the five Pandavas a little while ago, how come now here I was seeing Bhima alive! I thought it must be his ghost. Fortunately before I could die through fear, he was able to recognise me. He asked me, ‘Acharya, who killed our five sons and Dhrishtadyumna? Tell me the truth. I know that you will never stoop so low.’ I was aghast, ‘Five sons? But are you safe?’ He said, T was stupid enough not to kill Duryodhana. It must be his handiwork. Where has he gone?" I told him, T don’t know where Duryodhana has gone. The one who visited your camp and did the killing was Ashwattama. Both I and Kritavarma protested against it and urged him to give it up. In this darkness, my eyes cannot see. Only a little while ago he was here, but ran off somewhere. Kritavarma ran away, saying he would go to Dwaraka.’ Then Bhima shouted to all the torch-bearers, It is Ashwattama. Catch him. He is the killer.’ Well, that is my story. I don’t know what happened later. I waited there till day-break and after that came here. On the way, some hunters gave me a little rabbit’s meat, and that sustained me to walk up to the capital."

Dhritarashtra did not say a word.

Gandhari was lying, silent.

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Chapter

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THEY uprooted the bamboo bits of the structures in the camp and dismantled. Then they were piled up on the mound in the upper part of the camp. Then they placed the six corpses one next to the other. The corpses presented a terrible sight, half cut throats and heads dangling from the coagulated blood. It was already close to the noon. A few yards from corpses, they had caught Ashwattama and tied him up. Ashwattama had no doubt in his mind that the funeral pyre just made was meant not only for those six corpses but for him as well. He had tried his best to escape the fate, had begged, wept, raved, and screamed that he was the son of their Guru. Now he was struggling hard to reconcile to the inevitable end of being burnt alive.

Draupadi stretched her hands to embrace them in one grasp and lay there. The five Pandavas sat around. Since morning the corpses had been in the same position. And Draupadi had been lying down in the same fashion grasping her children. And those five, too, had been sitting in the same posture, their hands on their heads. Behind them was Subhadra, also sitting. Yuyudhana was standing. Here and there, there was a sprinkling of soldiers. Everywhere the silence of the dead. Even the river running below was ominously silent. Somebody was desperately needed to break this terrible silence. Krishna who was standing broke it, asking Subhadra, "Subhadra, lift Draupadi and make her sit down. Take her below. Is there any way other than enduring what has come to pass? The corpses should not be allowed to rot. Already, there is stench of the blood that has poured out and dried up."

Subhadra went up to Draupadi, held her shoulders and consoled her, "Elder sister, didn't my Abhimanyu die? Didn't I have to endure it? You are riper than I am. Please come over here."

Draupadi continued to lie over her sons in a clasp. Krishna went near her, held her by the shoulders, and made her sit down on a high-ground. He sat opposite to her. He thought the tears in her eyes had been exhausted, dried up. In a voice quivering with compassion, Krishna said, "You have been lying down embracing them since mid-night. Fraternal love and maternal love, I understand. But this is war,

and you have been seeing it for several days now. When death knocks at our door, shouldn't we welcome it? Which woman other than you can grasp better this terrible truth?"

Draupadi remained silent. But her tear-emptied eyes showed that she had reconciled herself with human dignity to the truth of death. The ashen sky covered everything in silence. There were some four or five vultures in the sky, spotting the new corpses. She lifted her head to see them. The vultures seemed anxious to come down to enjoy their feast, but the crowd below scared them. They were just milling around. After staring at them for a while, Draupadi spoke, "Yes, I have welcomed death."

Krishna watched her face. The other five dumb with sorrow were also looking at her. Subhadra was sitting near her, holding her shoulders. All on a sudden, Draupadi began to weep with abandon. This was the second time she was crying aloud after she did so when they brought her the news of their killing in the darkness. Between then and now she had been keeping silent, suppressing the spring of tears. Now her eyes were again over-flowing with tears. Moving close to her and holding her shoulders, Krishna spoke to her consolingly, "If you have accepted the inevitable, then don't cry."

Draupadi said, somewhat bitterly, "Krishna, even you don't seem to understand what is happening inside me. When Abhimanyu died, Arjuna embraced Subhadra and wept loudly, drenching her with his tears. Didn't you see it? When Ghatotkacha died, Bhima carried the corpse and washed away the blood stains on it by his tears. You saw it or didn't you? Now I am weeping all alone for these five children of mine. The five fathers squatting there have not bothered to fall on their bodies and weep and rave. And none of them embraced mein sorrow as Arjuna did Subhadra. They are all sitting at an equal distance from my dead sons, as if they were mere spectators!"

The silence became deeper and more intense. Krishna passed his eyes over all the five. They were sitting there with faces contorted by a sense of guilt. Bhima suddenly leapt towards Draupadi and clasped her tightly and began to let loose a river of tears. Then Arjuna moved closer to her. He was followed by Dharmaraja, Nakula and Sahadeva. Draupadi pulled herself away brusquely from them, and stood up. The five of them sat on the ground, watching her, dumb and helpless. She spoke out in a clear and decisive voice, "Wretched Ashwattama gave me the bereavement of separation from my sons. But he also showed me a great truth. Krishna, untie him. Let him get away and live anywhere. Satyaki, please place the bodies one by one on the pyre. Then cover them with logs. It is I who has the right to light the pyre. It is for you to do it to your dead Supreme Commander. Otherwise, as he is my elder brother, and as he had nurtured my sons

in the company of his sons, I shall do it. And he died while sleeping with them."

Yuyudhana was staring intently at the scene. Draupadi's thick hair on the head was flowing down in disorder. Her chest stood out in uncompromising pride. Her shoulders sloped. Her eyes were contemptuous and her stare straight-forward. Yuyudhana imagined that this was how she must have looked when, after the gambling debacle, Dussasana dragged herby her saree into the full court—a picture of dignity, contempt, pride and strength. The five husbands squatting on the ground had faces that looked like masks of death. Bhima who had yesterday evening proclaimed his triumph over Duryodhana now sat there huddled, exhausted and almost dead.

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Chapter

83

KRISHNA said, "Maharaja, there is no use now with harsh words. If you had behaved like a father to them, this war would not have occurred. I told you this when I came here for talks of peace. Even now it is not too late. Develop towards them the attitude and feelings of a father. It shall be my responsibility to cleanse them of all anger and revengefulness. After all, it is easy for the victor to forget the bitterness of the war."

Dhritarashtra was sitting silent and quiet like a slab of stone. The rays of the early morning sun were flooding the chamber through the window. Krishna repeated the same words, but with greater force. The blind old king said in compromising tone, "Alright let us talk peace and arrive at an agreement. They can proceed to their Khandavaprastha."

Krishna "Who will rule in Hastinavati?"

Dhritarashtra, "My son will arrive. He will bring new armies. I shall persuade him to talk peace to respect your words."

Krishna, "Maharaja, your capacity for illusion seems incredible. Duryodhana is dead. It was Bhima who witnessed his death first. Then I was the next to identify him. Because I had directly identified his dead body, I am telling you that he is dead."

Dhritarashtra did not weep. Gandhari said, ‘T knew that ‘ Kripacharya told us a lie."

Holding Ghandhari’s hand, Krishna said, "What Kripacharya said is true as far as it goes. The subsequent developments you interpreted stubbornly to suit your wishful thinking. Let us leave it for now. Shall I bring them now? Nobody can prevent them now from entering Hastinavati. Let me repeat, no force on earth can block their arrival here. If you want to persist in hatred and enmity, how can you live?"

After a brief pause, Gandhari said, "Krishna, go and bring them. I shall fondle their heads one by one and entreat them to forget the past."

Krishna went to fetch the Pandava brothers. Dharmaraja agreed to

make peace, without much delay. Arjuna, too, agreed. Nakula and Sahadeva were not happy at it, but did not insist on their position. Only Bhima refused to accompany Krishna. Bhima let loose a tirade against his uncle, saying, "All that has happened was due to that blind old fellow. Even before the war I never bowed to him in respect. Why should I do so after our victory? Does seniority in age qualify one automatically to be respected?" He was furious with Krishna. At last when Kunti asked him to do so, he accompanied him. Kunti went on Krishna's advice. Draupadi followed them in silence. Vidura went with them. The order of their arrival in Dhritarashtra's presence was first Krishna, then the five brothers, one after another, Satyaki, Kunti, Draupadi, and Vidura last. The servant-maid called Vidura by hand-sign, and whispered in his ears, "Uncle, please don't tell anybody that I told you this. There is a matter that you should know about."

Vidura, "I can assure you that my tongue is never tempted to reveal what falls on my ears! Tell me."

Servant, "You know that Maharaja Krishna had come earlier to visit our old Maharaja. Well, soon after he left, our Maharaja sent for a dagger. He has hidden it inside his blanket. Enraged at the death of his children he may try to harm Kunti's children."

Vidura went back quietly. Then he motioned to Krishna to come closer, and whispered in his ears the information just received from 'the servant-maid. Krishna sat to the right of Dhritarashtra on the couch. To the left sat Gandhari, blind-folded.

Krishna said, "Maharaja, your five sons have arrived. Dharmaraja, come and touch your father's feet."

Dharmaraja touched the old man's feet with devotion. Then Dhritarashtra clasped his face and passed his hand over Dharamaraja's head, blessing him with longevity. Then Dharmaraja left. Then Krishna called, "Bhima, come." But Bhima did not respond immediately. Krishna himself got up, and brought Bhima by holding his arm. Krishna explained, "Maharaja, Bhima is hesitating because he is not sure whether you will forgive him or not. Please forgive him and embrace him." Then he brought Bhima near the old man's feet and asked him to bow down. Dhritarashtra's left hand passed over Bhima's back. But Dhritarashtra's right hand which had gone inside the blanket, was about to be pulled out. Krishna, anticipating the move, intervened. He held tightly the old man's wrist. Then Bhima withdrawing a few feet, shouted, "Krishna, I have a better idea of the nature of this old snake than you. That was why I refused to accompany you."

Soon everybody present understood what had happened. Dharmaraja, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva, began to shake in anger.

Dhritarashtra shouted at the top of his voice, "Krishna, I knew you were a cunning fellow. I have the right to take revenge on the fellow who had killed one hundred sons of mine and drunk their blood. Let my curse be on you for coming in my way. Have you any idea of what it means to lose one's children? Hundred, all hundred, my sons. Hundred sons born of my blood. It seems this fellow alone killed all of them. If now Duryodhana is not alive and is dead, this fellow must have killed him, too. Killed him by snuffing out his pride. Leave my hand." He shot up and rushed forward. By then Krishna had taken away the dagger and handed it over to Vidura. Krishna spoke to Dhritarashtra in a placating tone, "Maharaja, you have no eyes to see Bhima. Listen to me. I shall describe him to you. His forehead, cheeks, chin, chest, shoulders, thighs, arms, legs, and in fact, the whole body is tattooed with wounds, and the blood from them has coagulated, making his body coarse to touch. It is a tough and thick-skinned body that has received and withstood all sorts of injuries, from arrows and other weapons. Your emaciated, old hand would have made no dent in it. Nothing would have come out of your attack. May be he would have lost some more blood. That's all. But as soon as it touched his skin, he would have lifted you and smashed you to the ground. That is his nature. I have not saved him. I have saved you from him."

Dhritarashtra collapsed on the couch. And then broke down, weeping loudly. From the ugly eyes which had been blind from birth, began to pour tears in profusion. After he regained some control over himself, he said, "Krishna, tell Bhima to finish me. I who have lost one hundred sons...." Krishna intervened and said, "Gandhari, you who have also lost one hundred sons, will you forgive the Pandavas? The war was not of their asking. Tell me truly if you will forgive..."Then he moved to the other side of the couch, held her hand, sitting by her, and said, "Look, I am two years younger than your eldest son, Duryodhana. You should forgive me."

Gandhari did not weep. She was sitting, silent and dignified. She said in a measured voice, "The count of hundred is to the Maharaja's credit. That is his account. But the sons borne by this servant-maid, with the name Gandhari, were only fourteen. A son-in-law has also died. This is the size of my sorrow, a small one. Not as large as the Maharaja's."

Dhritarashtra said, "My curse may have no power. But just one sigh from this lady, will engulf and carry away these sons of Kunti in a flood."

Krishna, "Lady Gandhari, I have been thirsting to discuss one intimate, personal issue with you. If you agree to tell me the truth, I shall broach it. At least once in a life-time, there will be occasion to

tell nothing but truth, the whole truth, and face it. It will be the time when no hiding or pretension will do. I imagine that the time has now come for you. Will you tell me the truth?"

Gandhari, "Yes. You can ask."

Krishna, "If you so desire, we two, you and I, can retire to another room and discuss."

Gandhari, "First tell me what it is you want to know."

Krishna, "The Maharaja was born blind. Why did you close your eyes permanently to the world like this?"

Dhritarashtra, "She is a great devotee of the husband cult. She denied herself the sight denied to her husband."

Krishna, "Maharaja, let her answer. Let her inner conscience speak."

Gandhari, "What is gained by telling the truth?"

Krishna, "You shed illusions. Out of that, peace will come. Hence I urge you to speak the truth. Shall we both adjourn to the next room? Or shall we request them to go out and leave us alone?"

Gandhari kept silent. All those squatting on the floor on a mat were absolutely still and silent.

Krishna, "After the marriage was fixed, how did you get yourself blind-folded?"

Gandhari, "Let us forget it, Krishna. Let us not rake up old wounds, old griefs."

Krishna, "Yet, mother, tell us. Composing yourself, tell us."

Gandhari, "Well, if you insist. The marriage was fixed. I thought of running away from home. Even if I had fled, I was sure that Bhishma and his soldiers would have razed our city to the ground, alleging that my father had deliberately hidden me. Krishna, I understand that you have travelled in many lands. Have you ever visited our Gandhara land?"

Krishna, "Yes, I have been there. Beautiful hills and green trees all the year round."

Gandhari, "Blue skies, one tree or creeper or other blossoming — flowers in all the seasons. Sweet water. Wild juice berries tasting like heaven. Cool climate where you can't sweat even in dream!- Is _ there a more beautiful land anywhere?"

Krishna, "No."

Gandhari, "Well, we are poor people. We don't have smooth, level

ground as here. Therefore we cannot grow cartloads of grain there. We are poor in gold and other metals. How can you get such things in a hilly country? And where there is no wealth, how can there be a big army? Bhishma sent a large contingent of his soldiers. With them came cartloads of grain, utensils, ornaments and jewellery. Attached to them was the message, 'These are tokens of friendship. But if you refuse to offer to my blind son a bride, there is the army, a token of my enmity. And to symbolise your fear and our terror.' My father was scared. He also became greedy. Of course, if there were no greed, there would have been no fear of the army. After all, if the hills-men fight, hiding from their treacherous terrain, they can put up significant resistance against the plains, though outnumbered. How long would have the Kuru army endured our mountainous attack? And so far away from you?"

Krishna, "Most certainly, not long."

Gandhari, "Father succumbed to his greed. Right in his presence, I tore a strip impulsively from the upper cloth I was wearing, and declared, If you insist on giving me away in marriage to that blind fellow, I shall never set my eyes on him.' Then I covered my eyes tightly with that strip of cloth. Even this act of mine didn't melt father's heart. Perhaps he thought I would reconcile to my fate, give up my stubbornness after three or four days and take off the cover! Well, he put me in a bridal palanquin and sent me away to this Kuru land as a blind man's bride. I was carried in it till we reached our boundary. From then on, I was shifted to a chariot and driven to Hastinavati. Till then I had never seen a chariot. But later, though I sat in so many, I never saw one. Krishna, can you imagine what a lovely girl I was? I used to look at my reflection in the clear waters in the hills, their clarity never muddied, and felt elated. My friends used to weave dream-tales around me. Well, there ended the story of my beauty, my shape and form. I never looked at myself after leaving my land. And I did not have the fortune to get a husband who could look at my loveliness and radiance. I had a husband who couldn't know what is beauty. And what happened next? Bhishma was impatient that I had not become pregnant. I didn't know anything. This husband of mine didn't know a thing. Later I believe a servant-maid taught him all about sex. Then we slept together, and I began to bear children, one after another. And he also slept with the servant-maids in the palace, and they, too, began to bear sons. It is said they were one hundred. I don't know. Who can count the piglets? I bore only fourteen sons and a daughter."

Krishna, "After you established yourself here, why didn't you take off the covering?"

Gandhari, "Krishna, what I am going to say is the real truth. I shall

tell you bluntly. Once I came here, Bhishma and others crowned me as a goddess. They sang my praise, called me, 'Great devotee committed to the husband-cult! She has sacrificed her sight to share with her husband his blindness. She worships her husband. The spot her feet tread is sacred. The land where she lives will overflow with wealth and prosperity, and so on...' How they heaped praise after praise on me, and built a legend round me! In the beginning, such praise used to infuriate me. I believe one begins to relish the taste of such praise sooner or later. I got used to it, began to enjoy it, and, as time passed, did not want to lose it. I believed in the legend that the land where I lived prospered, that victory was with my side. Victory indeed! In this war, my sons, grand-sons, my son- in-law, all dead. The whole army wiped out. Stark starvation in this palace. Krishna, do you know the truth? My widowed daughters-in-law, who returned from the front, have been without food for four days. If the place where I live should prosper, how did this happen, this starvation? I myself forgot the real reason behind my self-imposed blindness, I drowned in the holy legend I was made into by the people in the palace and out there in the city of Hastinavati. Yes, this war has tom off the veil of legend, and revealed the cruelty of naked truth. It was just at the right moment and when I was in the right mood, that you touched the depth of my heart. It is astonishing, don't you think, that till now none of my children asked me, 'Mother, why have you become blind like this? Please open your eyes at least to see us, please.' The way you asked me, holding my hand with affection. Not even my daughter. They used merely to touch my feet with devotion, thinking that my sacredness was founded on my blindness!'"

Gandhari stopped speaking. There was a roaring silence in the room. Dhritarashtra sat leaning against the wall, his legs stretched.

After a short pause, Krishna asked, "Mother, it means you have not seen any country other than your Gandhara. You have not seen any other people, excepting the inhabitants of your Gandhara. When a baby came out of your womb, didn't you have any desire to see it?"

Gandhari, "The real joy from children is touch, not rough sight. Not that I didn't desire to see but I was mesmerised by the legend of the great practitioner of the husband-worshipping cult! The illusion of being a mortal goddess! Krishna, can truth ever attain the power of illusion? I am not worried about not seeing the husband. But I regret that I didn't see my children. After they were born, I used to clasp them to my chest and feed them with my milk. Look here, my breasts which in my girlhood before I blind-folded myself, were round and full and taut like mangoes. Now after constant feeding of my children with their milk, they hang loosely. That was about all the contact with children. Once they grew up, what did they have to do with their blind mother? What stories was I capable of narrating to them?

Excepting the memory of my Gandhara's mountain-springs, mountain-streams and hills? Could I have told them about Hastinavati and the river and fields surrounding it, and the people living in it? The servant-maids became their mothers just as they became wives to my husband. After the sons grew up they brought wives. They also got servant-maids and kingdom. They got power. They were immersed in all affairs of the kingdom. In all this, this blind mother was left alone, confined to the darkness of solitude. The husband began to notice her and talk to her only after she was past her youth. It is only when the war started and his worries multiplied that he has been constantly in my company. All that I got out of my children was their respectful touching of my feet under the illusion that I was holy. The same kind of respect from daughters-in-law and even servant-maids. The very servant-maids who used to engage my husband in sexual games did not hesitate to worship me as a goddess, touching reverentially my feet. All right, let that pass. I bore them, delivered them, nurtured them on my milk. They grew up. I believed that their words represented justice. What other» r channel excepting them was available to me to relate myself to the outside world? Well, they grew up, fought a war and have now died. I did not glimpse their form and shape when alive. It seems they had inherited my physical beauty and attractiveness. So the servant-maids used to say. Of course, they may have lied to me to please me. Krishna, you tell me the truth. Were my sons, Duryodhana, Dussasana, Durmarshana, Durmukha and the rest of them, handsome? Was my daughter a beauty?" Gandhari went on raining questions. She didn't pause for answers. She wounded up, "It is better for a mother to die before the eyes of her children. But all my sons have died before me. What a brief record it is! Giving birth to them, feeding them with the milk of my breasts, and then hearing the news of their death! No, I never saw them, not even once."

Then Gandhari was silent. Her inner anguish had caught the minds of those squatting on the floor themselves caught in the net of a death-like silence. The particles of dust were silently circling in the sun-beams entering the room through the window. Just then their attention shifted to Dhritarashtra who was weeping loudly. Krishna asked, "Why, Maharaja "?

Dhritarashtra, "All my sons are gone. The kingdom is gone. And even she is now deserting me."

Gandhari, relentlessly, "Who has withdrawn the supporting hand? When did you ever hold my hands? Maharaja, having lived with you for so many years, don't I know that I have none else but you to sustain me and succour me? Even if you flee to the forest, I shall follow you. Yes, I shall follow you, grasping the tail of your blanket!"

Dhritarashtra became quiet.

Krishna asked, "Mother, you were not born blind. If you merely cover your eyes with a band of cloth, your eye-sight is not lost. At least, why not now remove it and look around?"

Gandhari, "After so many years of blindness?"

Krishna, "So what?"

Gandhari, "After so many years of blindness, what is there to see, Krishna?"

Krishna, "Well, you can see me, standing before you, the Maharaja by your side, people sitting opposite to you, Hastinavati itself, if you feel like, even the battle-field. Seeing the battle-front, if you report directly to him, his blindness may be cancelled through your eyes."

Gandhari, "He has the assistance of servant-maids for that.?

Krishna, "So far he has been seeing things through the eyes of the servant-maids, and through the eyes of his sons. You, too, have been seeing the world through the eyes of your children. Now at last you should see things with your own eyes. And show the world to the Maharaja through your eyes." Then Krishna tried to remove the band covering her eyes.

As soon as Krishna's fingers touched the band, Gandhari resisted strongly his attempt to remove the band, protesting loudly. She seemed to be begging for the preservation of her self-identity. But Krishna untied the band, and removed the piece of cloth. But her eyes were closed. Krishna urged, "Open your eyes, mother. lam pleading with you. You are not blind. Remember your days before you blind-folded yourself. Well, open them as you used to then after waking up from sleep." Then he gently pressed his fingers against her eyelids. He opened her eyes slowly. The images clashed with each other to produce a visual chaos. Unable to face the light she immediately closed her eye-lids.

Gandhari, "Krishna, I find it difficult to see. Give me back my band."

Krishna, "You are like a sick person finding it difficult to walk soon after recouping from it. So, no more blind-folding." Then Krishna got up and closed the door of the window. The bright sun-light became subdued into dim light. Gandhari opened her eyes again. She blinked for some time, she felt a stab of pain when she had to face the heat of the bright light in the place of the familiar cool of darkness. There was agony inside. The contempt, anger, helplessness which had arisen when she first blind-folded herself back in her town, now returned as she opened her eye-lids. Her mouth became speechless

and her lips trembled. Now she tried as hard to open her eyes to see as she had earlier to close her eyes never to see. Slowly the eyes began to focus things. Dumb-struck, she began to look around the room. She saw the door opposite, the court-yard beyond it, the shelf where the lamp was kept, then the whole lot of people sitting down, and the person by her side, whose hands were still near her ears. She asked herself, "This must be Krishna?" After flapping her eye-lids several times, she adjusted her sight. Then surprised at her own dumbness, she spoke at last to ask Krishna, "Krishna, who are these people?"

Krishna said, "One by one, come here and bow to her. First, you, Dharmaraja."

As he got up, held her legs tightly, his face came close to her eyes. She saw his build. When Bhima was called, he repeated the same act. She stared at him dumb-founded. Then came Arjuna, and after him, Nakula and Sahadeva. Then Krishna said, "Kunti, you come, too."

Gandhari, "What? Is Kunti also here?"

Kunti came up, and, holding her shoulders, said, "I am Kunti. Your younger sister." Gandhari stared at her face. Then Kunti said, "Child, Draupadi, come and bow to her. Gandhari, this is Draupadi."

Gandhari passed her hand solicitously over her head. She combed her hair with her fingers. Gandhari’s eyes filled with tears.

Krishna said, "Mother, don’t stir out in the sun today. Don’t have the windows fully open. Try to spend some time in dimness and darkness. Let the eyes get practice in the art of seeing."

Gandhari turned to the right. Her husband, leaning against the wall, had stretched his legs on the couch. White beard, bald head, teeth intact. Eyes dried up. The white nerves on the palms stood out. Her eyes rooted in him. Then she lifted her hands, and passed them over her own face to get a feel of the wrinkles criss-crossing her face, again and again.

At that point, Dhritarashtra asked, "Gandhari, can you see with your eyes now?"

Gandhari, "Yes. This Krishna removed the band. I can see all of them. I can see you, too."

Dhritarashtra, unable to control his anger and frustration, ranted, "Krishna, you are a great sinner. I understand your trick. You want to separate me from my wife after you have caused my children’s destruction. Gandhari, this behaviour is unworthy of one like you who had attained the status and glory of a goddess. Don’t fall into the trap of this cunning fellow who wants to strip you of your glory and

reduce you to an ordinary woman in the street."

Then anger gave way to anguish as he started to weep, eyes streaming tears.

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Chapter

84

THAT whole day Gandhari was silent. As usual, Dhritarashtra was sitting on the couch. Leaning against the wall, and then lying down. She, too, sat up for a while. Then she got up and went round the palace, visiting its many rooms. She stared hard at the pillars, walls, windows and the floor. She thought it was much bigger than the palace in her Gandhara, though she felt that her memory of the palace back home was none too distinct. Just then a man with a utensil in his hand came. He was old, dark, with white scraggy hair on his head, white garb. She didn't recognise him.

He said, "Don't you recognise me? You saw me in the morning."

Gandhari, "Oh, yes! You are Vidura. My memory is weak."

She gave her husband two mugs full of rice porridge, and herself ate some. She didn't wait for the servant-maid to do the job. Their bellies had been yearning for some food. She did not relish the style of his gobbling up, but kept her counsel. She removed the mugs and placed them near the door. Then she lay down on the couch. She felt tired. She had the sense of having gained something after having lost everything! Though sleep was dragging her, she resisted it, widening her eyes to watch the beams above, the shelf where the lamp burned, and the door. After repeated gazing at things, she slept without knowing when she exactly crossed the threshold of wakefulness, and what was dream and what was not. She slept soundly. When she woke up, she heard Dhritarashtra snoring gently by her side. She wondered whether the snoring had awakened her. Awake she was, but with eyes shut. With closed eyes, she was in the familiar world of darkness. After a long time she remembered that she had now left that world of perpetual darkness.

Then she opened her eyes. She saw the room. She knew that if she went beyond it, there was a whole world waiting to be seen. She opened the windows. Either because the arrival of evening had dimmed the light or because her eyes had now got somewhat used to light, her eyes did not feel hurt by any overpowering sense of light. She saw beyond the window the tower of a building. She asked herself, "Isn't it royal court hall?" She stood by the window for a

while just looking out, at nothing in particular. She went to the outer yard, and sat on a mat spread along the wall. She sat alone. It was a large yard. And she felt more alone because of its largeness. Suddenly a thought struck her." Now we have become separated, I and Dhritarashtra. Till now I had not seen him. I was merely a wife who bore him children, his children. Now those sons are all dead. I have begun to see with my eyes. What bond had been there between us excepting our common blindness?" She felt as if her old body had put on new wings. Then she remembered Kunti. What height! What wide body-frame! Even now she looked every bit a queen. May be that was why she brought into the world such powerful and brave sons! But then she realised immediately that she had never opened her eyes even once to look at her sons. She asked herself, "How did they look?" She could recall only their voices. Their height, their build and size, their looks, their colour? No, she missed these for ever now. Her eyes could now have before them only the picture of Dharma, Bhima, Arjuna Nakula and Sahadeva. She recalled what the person supplying grain to Pandu and Kunti had said years ago. How many years ago? At least fifty. According to him Pandu had said, "The birth of this Dharmaraja is not a birth natural to Ksatriyas. We need a son with the qualities and virtues of a Ksatriya warrior. I shall bring a seed that can produce such a son. You must undergo Niyoga with that seed, and then you will give me a son of whose prowess we can be proud." Gandhari recalled, "Then it seems Pandu searched for such a person, and at last found the army chief of a Deva people in the Deva land beyond the Himalayas, who was called Marutta." Bhima's image came before Gandhari-'s eyes. She felt like seeing him again. What height! What broad shoulders! What wide chest! What long and thick arms! What display of bravery all through the war! And Arjuna, so handsome, even at fifty. About Dussasana's age. Even at fifty, what attractive form!

She wondered whether the king of the Devas was picked up for Niyoga by Kunti herself or by Pandu. Gandhari was puzzled why Kunti went in for Niyoga after getting such a splendid son as Bhima. Gandhari now recalled how she had then abused Kunti for her questionable morality in going in for a third Niyoga, and that, too, before her servant-maids. Gandhari felt ashamed at the recollection. And what attractive features Nakula and Sahadeva had! They looked like persons under thirty. They had a medium height, neither too tall, too short! Gandhari yearned to send for the five Pandavas and enjoy looking at them again. She now began to appreciate the Niyoga system, which enabled a woman to choose and invite a male with the desirable seed, and bear children. There should be no need to ask the husband even. She thought, "How nice if a woman could decide first on the looks, shape, size and form of the child she desired, and then seek the appropriate male, beg for his seed, and then bear the child

of her desire!"She said to herself, "Irrespective of my own desire, I had to blind-fold myself and become blind, receive the worthless semen of a blind husband, and give birth to poor quality off-spring, and suffer. You, Kunti, are more fortunate and more merited spiritually. Had I your opportunities, I, too, like you, would have borne brave and wise sons. And this final defeat in war might have been avoided." She heard Dhritarashtra shout, "Servant-maid." The servant maid was not available. Maybe she did not come for work as she was starving or maybe she thought there remained none in this magnificent palace to pay the wages for her service! When he found no immediate response, Dhritarashtra became furious and screeched, his voice filling every nook and comer of the palace, "Servant-maid, Where the hell are you?" Gandhari herself got up and asked him, "What do you want?"

Dhritarashtra, "Where is the servant-maid?"

Gandhari, "She hasn't reported for work."

Dhritarashtra, "Is the lamp burning?"

Gandhari, "It is not yet evening."

Dhritarashtra screeched, "You are telling a lie. You are leaving me alone in darkness."

She didn't reply. She just stood there in silence.

Dhritarashtra, "Are you even now without the band?"

Gandhari, "I threw it away in the morning itself."

Dhritarashtra, "Can your eyes see?"

Gandhari, "Yes."

He remained silent and merely sighed. She saw his deep-sunken eyes get wet. She asked him, "Why are you weeping? At what sorrow?"

He answered, "Because all my sons are dead, and you have moved so far from me, into the other world of the visible."

Then he turned towards the wall and covered himself with the blanket. But she remained there, standing. She was anxious to say something to him, anything, which could re-assure him that she was not deserting him, not walking away from him. But she found no such words. After a while, he called, "Servant-maid."

Gandhari, "There is no servant-maid. What do you want?"

Dhritarashtra, "I want to empty my bladder."

Gandhari, "Come. I shall take you."

He pulled his hand away from hers, saying, "No, no." He explained, "Only a servant-maid is alright for it. I feel a sense of shame, as your eyes can now see." After that, he withdrew his hand into the blanket. Then he covered himself with the blanket. She stood there waiting. He did not turn to the other side. Didn't move even a little. She remembered how hard it was for him to control the pressure of the urine. She went to the yard outside, and from there she entered the open front-yard. Then she crossed the veranda, and then to the outer yard, thinking that it was an incredibly big palace. She crossed the large front door, overlooking the ramparts. She looked intently at the plain beyond the ramparts. It was evening. She spotted some figure near the court hall, and it looked like a servant-maid. She motioned the figure to come. She came. Yes, it was a servant-maid. She did not drape below her thighs, cover her head and her arms. Gandhari knew this was the dress of women of the lower castes.

Gandhari, "Are you a palace servant?"

Woman, "Yes, Lady."

Gandhari, "The Maharaja is asking for you. Go and see what he wants."

Gandhari stood there, watching the sun set in yellow splendour. But she couldn't get the full view because the tall building of the court hall blocked it partially. She thought, "If only that building didn't come in the way, it would have been so nice." She recalled her days back in native Gandhara, where she used to watch the sun-rise and sun-set from the summit of a hill. She thought, "Women after marriage usually visit their parents' home once every year or two years. But I never went back home, to my native land. What could I have seen there with my blind-folded eyes? And, moreover, I had determined not to see again my greedy and cowardly father. Even if I go back now, it won't be my Gandhara, the Gandhara of my birth and girlhood. All links have snapped." Her eyes filled with tears. Through her tear-filled eyes what she saw appeared to be soaked in her tears.

The servant-maid returned.

Gandhari said to her, "Look. Please go to Vidura's house. There is a person called Krishna there, with the Pandavas. Will you tell him that I want to see him?"

The servant left, crossed the plain, and then turned to the left. It was then that Gandhari understood that Vidura's house lay in that direction. It seemed that he went away from the main town to live on the bank of the river. She was moved by a desire to see the river. It was supposed to be a big river, not like the rivulets in her mountainous Gandhara. Then she saw the sun disappear totally below the far-away horizon. It was semi-dark, and there was a little

time before it turned wholly dark. She thought that if there was no light, the night was as good as being blind. She felt the air chilly. She went indoors.

After some time, Krishna arrived.

Krishna, "Mother, how are your eyes?"

Gandhari, "I was just out when the sun was setting. It gave me a slight pain in the eyes."

Krishna, "Well, in two days, you will get over it."

Gandhari, "Krishna, I am consumed by a desire. There are no men left on our side to help me realise it. I feel embarrassed to ask Kunti's sons. I thought you were the most appropriate person. That was why I sent for you."

Krishna, "Tell me what you want me to do."

Gandhari, "If possible, I want to see at least the dead bodies of my sons."

Krishna kept silent, bending his head. She asked in a broken voice, "Why, Krishna?"

Krishna, "It is possible to identify spots where people have died. And here on a battle-field vultures, dogs, wolves and jackals, gobble up all corpses without distinction between kings and common soldiers. They would have obliterated all identification. Even otherwise, corpses rot and grow indistinguishable."

Gandhari, "I know it. Yet I am itching to try. Also to see how a battle-field looks, with my own eyes."

Krishna promised her that he would arrive the next day before sun-rise with his chariot.

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Chapter 85

AS Gandhari was climbing the chariot in the biting pre-dawn cold, she saw another woman already sitting in the chariot.

Gandhari, "Who are you?"

Krishna, "It takes time to co-ordinate memory with sight. Don't you see, it is Kunti?" Then Krishna signalled with his eyes to the horses to go.

The chariot left Hastinavati and proceeded on a road flanked by fields. Gandhari found the landscape bare and empty. Also her mind was in some strain. She felt some hostility to Kunti, as she thought, "I am in search of my sons' corpses. She is apparently going to see the bodies of those killed by her sons. And in my company!"Suddenly Gandhari said, "Krishna I have changed my mind. I don't wish to go there. Let us return."

But Krishna said, "Anyhow we have set out. I have brought all the provisions necessary on the journey—food and water. You and Kunti are sisters-in-law. Also sisters. I brought her for your company. She has shed all old enmities. I am sure, you, too, have shed them. Have you?"

Gandhari did not answer. She thought that this Krishna had a very sharp mind. He would go straight to the inside of another person, and discover what went on there.

Kunti spoke, "Gandhari, I don't know whether you know about Karna. He used to worship you like a mother."

Gandhari, staring right into Kunti's face, asked, "Vidura told me that he had taken you to the battle-field. Karna had your face, your long arms, your high shoulders. Vidura described him to me. I remember that his palms that used to touch my feet, were big and powerful. Only this much I know first-hand, the rest that I know about him was through hear-say."

Kunti took hold of Gandhari's hand. Her eyes began to fill with tears. Gandhari's eyes, too, overflowed with tears. The chariot was speeding fast. Krishna kept to himself, without saying anything. After

some three or four hours, he stopped the chariot near a stream. He watered the horses. Then Kunti passed on the soft, cooked rice she had brought to Gandhari. She gave Krishna a pancake. She herself took some rice.

When the journey resumed, after their eating, Gandhari said, "Kunti, it seems that when they got Dhritarashtra married, you were worried that, if you did not produce the first son, the kingdom would slip out of your hand. Pandu, too, was worried, and asked you to undergo Niyoga. Is it true? I and Dhritarashtra got the news about this. I know that you were jealous of me. But I, too, was jealous of you because you bore first a son. That jealousy went on growing. Vidura told me that now that your sons are victorious you have chosen to be aloof from their victory."

By noon, they reached the battle-ground. There were fewer vultures flying in the sky or squatting on the ground now. Also the number of dogs and jackals had diminished. In several places, the corpses had rotted away to such an extent that only bones remained. The stench had reduced considerably., But in some places the stench was still bad enough. Krishna took them round, explaining to them the main battles in detail that had occurred at different sites. When they reached a certain area, they found the whole plain being searched by hundreds of men. They were rolling the corpses and pushing aside the chariots. Gandhari asked, "Krishna, what are they doing?"

Krishna, "This was where the biggest fight took place. On the day Drona died or so, or perhaps on the day Jayadratha died, several other leading figures also died. These people are searching for the ornaments, dress and metal pieces, and decorative parts of horses and chariots."

Gandhari, "Who are they?"

Krishna, "Some people from surrounding villages. They must be subjects of your Kuru kingdom. They are searching systematically one by one, the battle-grounds."

Gandhari stared at them intently. In the after-noon heat, her eyes pained slightly. However, she could see clearly. She found them kicking dead bodies and rolling them, and removing from them dress and ornaments, with no respect for the dead. Some of them were busy cutting off ears in order to remove ear-rings. One person had taken off the crown from a corpse's head, and was examining it. Another was busy pulling out the ornaments from the neck of a dead horse.

Gandhari asked, "Krishna, when we mourn the dead in the palace, our subjects seem to be busy snatching things from the dead, as if

they have no connection with our sorrow. Is this all right?"

Krishna, "They have lost their own kith and kin also in the war."

Gandhari could not take her eyes off that sight, as the chariot moved. Then she said with a deep sigh, "You are right, Krishna. Here, no dead person can be identified. I don't think I shall find my sons. Let us get back."

Krishna turned the chariot back.

On the return journey, Gandhari was tired. Kunti also became tired. None spoke. In the running chariot, the two women lay down side by side. Krishna minded his job of driving. The horses also were tired. Krishna had the impression that Gandhari woke up in fear a few times. Hence, he began to watch her with some attention. In fact, he found her shaking with fear. Maybe she had nightmares, he thought. On the way, he halted the chariot near a stream, and let the horses drink water. When he was unyoking the horses, she woke up. After the horses had drunk water, the journey was resumed. He too felt like dozing off. After some distance, he overcame sleepiness, stopped the chariot briefly to drink water. As he turned back to pick up the water jug, he was surprised to find Gandhari sitting up. Both her eyes were open, and the eye-lids fluttered. But from her expression, it appeared as if she felt blind, unable to see. Krishna continued to stare at her. She raised her hands, pressed her eyes gently, and opened her eye-lids to see."

Krishna, "Why, what happened?"

Gandhari, "I woke up suddenly. I sat up and opened my eyes. I couldn't see a thing. I feel now that I have gone really blind."

Kunti slept on. Krishna sat in silence. The horses were galloping on their own. After a long pause, Gandhari said, "My mind tells me that I shall not recover my sight again positively. I shall be blind as before with blind Dhritarashtra. This gives me a kind of mental peace."

Krishna found no words to say. He simply went on staring at her. He thought she was mechanically carrying on her neck a head that wore a death-mask — her cheeks, nose, mouth, chin unable to articulate any emotion of a living being, on her face.

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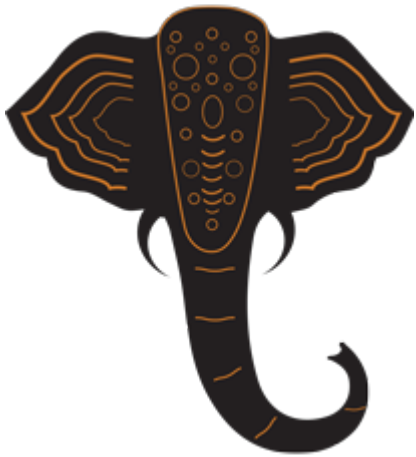
PART FOURTEEN



Chapter

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DARK clouds clasped the sky. They seemed to be dragging the sky to the level of the tall trees. Everybody was lifting his head towards the sky, certain that the winter rain would pour on them that day. In one corner of Vidura's house, Uttare, widow of Abhimanyu, had been undergoing birth-pangs since mid-night. It was still morning. Kunti was all alone. Vidura sent for two expert mid-wives. Dharmaraja, who had not yet formally been installed on the throne, occupied a seat in the royal court hall to receive visitors. Of the three that arrived, the one ahead of the others, blessed the Maharaja, and then took a seat. He said, "My name is Pulaha. I am the manager of Krishna Dvaipayana's hermitage. Those two are metaphysicians, devoted to the search of truth." Dharmaraja stood up immediately and ordered the customary porridge made of yogurt, ghee, water, honey and sugar to greet a guest. He greeted them by saying, "Is the supreme master of the Vedas, our grandfather, the great sage Dvaipayana, doing well?" The servant-maids who were to act as mid-wives came running, wet with the light shower that had fallen outside, and proceeded to the room. Outside, the villagers were coming out to watch the sky which had promised them much with massive dark clouds but disappointed them with a mild shower. The cloudy, rainless sky produced a sultry weather, and people threw out their blankets, came into the open, shouting, "Rain, rain, we want rain!"Neela asked, "Maharaja, when I was passing this way, I saw a row of boulders. Does that row mark the boundary with the land of the Raksasas on this side?" These words fell on Bhima's ears bu t hardly touched his inner mind. Bhima felt sure that it was here that they had crossed the river. It was thirty years ago, and the memory of it was considerably dim. After all, where had he the presence of mind in that dangerous situation to note and memorise landmarks to identify a spot? Bhima recollected, "I had gone that way only six months back." The recollection produced in him a sense of shame." She offered me her son even before I asked for him. She had said that those other sons were also mine as she had not married again.

How can I go back now and stand before her, raising my head, and stand before Kamakatanakati. If she asked me what did I do to her husband? It would produce not just a sense of shame but a terrible

pain inside." The inner anguish caused so much mental confusion, that he was unable to see the way with certainty. He wondered whether they had to go straight south or perhaps turn a little to the east. At that point, the horse came to a halt, refusing to move. So did Neela's horse. Did the horses sense the presence of a tiger or a boar? Bhima said, "Neela, get ready my bow. The horses didn't lift their legs at all." Then Neela pointed out and said, "Maharaja, look there, the forest. The horses halted because they smelled the fire. Look, flames to the left, flames to the right, the whole forest. The wind blows from here towards the forest." As he listened to Neela, Bhima's heart sank. He said, "How can there be any forest fire in the winter? Somebody must have deliberately set fire to the forest. Maybe to scare away the wild animals or to smoke out honey-bees. Then it must have caught on..."Bhima stared hard at the spectacle. It was not merely the smoke rising from the fire, but the dark clouds in the sky that intensified the impression of smoke. Bhima thought that the clouds indicated the possibility of a winter rain. He was worried by the question: "Why did Karna kill Ghatotkacha who was actually fighting with somebody else, knowing well that he was his younger brother's son? Didn't he see me fallen on the ground near by? Or did he not attack me because I was his younger brother?" The smoke spiralling into the sky reminded him of the ' dead body of his son, Ghatotkacha, lying on the burning logs, his body dripping melted fat. He wondered whether the news of his death had already reached Salakatankati or whether he had the terrible task of breaking the news to her for the first time. Almost mechanically he got off the horse. He said to Neela, "You wait here, holding both the horses. Be ready with bows and arrows, and be watchful. I shall go and see what is happening there." Without waiting for Neela's response, he proceeded, as the smoke rose very high in the sky. But the sky was filled with dark clouds. Some cultivators, not interested in cultivating, had shown indifference to the rain. But even wild roots and berries needed rain to grow. Some, after getting this explanation for the need for the rain, joined in the chorus, shouting for the rain.

Dharmaraja said to Pulaha, "Duryodhana had done many wrong deeds. In my reign, the hermitages of sages will be accorded highest honour and full support. In future, you need not engage in agriculture to sustain the hermitage and its community. You need also not engage in animal husbandry. We shall supply you the necessary grain, clothes and other items from the royal stores, using the resources of the royal treasury." Pulaha looked happy. Then Dharmaraja continued, "But right now our treasury is empty. The royal storage has no stock even for use in the palace. As soon as the situation improves, I shall personally visit the hermitage with the provisions and learn the Vedic lore from the great sage himself." One of the two atheists, Vrisha, intervened to say, "The Maharaja's

generosity is very great. But what the hermitage needs is not the supply of provisions from the royal sources and resources. We need to have our own land, as before, to grow its requirements, and to have cowsheds and cows. Above all, the categorical assurance that the king shall not extend his authority into the land of the hermitage. The king should assure us that, under no circumstance, shall he invade our peace and freedom." Dharmaraja failed to grasp the meaning of the demand, and asked, "What do you mean?" Vrisha explained, "It means that the hermitages must not be under royal control in any sense. The hermitage must be in a position to tell the king when he errs, and advise him on the right conduct. The hermitages must enjoy a freedom not given to any part of the kingdom." The people in the towns were looking forward to the arrival of the rains because its waters would clean the streets and wash away all the filth and rubbish littered on them. First a few drops fell, and soon they became thicker. Soon there was a downpour. It was an unusually big rain for a winter. The hailstorm hit the ground like pebbles. Bhima welcomed it. It was bound to put off the forest fire. He addressed the rain, "You came at the right time. Otherwise this wealthy greenery would have been burnt. Look how the fire is battling with this heavy downpour!"He was watching the rain and fire warring against each other, from the shelter of a tree. Bhima's worry began to subside. Toothless old men said, "The mounting sins committed by the people have prevented the timely arrival of rains. At least, the rain is falling today, thanks to the meritorious deeds of our ancestors." In the forest elsewhere, Hiranyavati ran out of her bamboo hut and tried to vomit, when she couldn't control it any longer. Her Naga husband who followed her began to massage gently her back. She felt anger first, then she felt like laughing, and the urge to laugh made her angrier. She vomitted with so much noise that it disturbed women in the neighbouring huts. They all came out and danced around Hiranyavati. On another spot, the mid-wives told Kunti, "After another half a day, one day or two days of suffering, there will be delivery. Isn't that so?"

To produce warmth they lighted a fire. On the grass bed they spread a blanket. The water drops lodged in the branches of tall trees fell making a noise like the rain. The soaked earth sent up an earthy smell. Dharmaraja asked, "What do you think? Should the land have one ruler over it or two?" The other atheist, Anaranya, replied immediately, "For the Brahmins, the only ruler is God Budha. These people say that the ruler of the land has no jurisdiction over them. But we have no belief in gods or the sacred lore or scriptures. Our only argument is that truth-seekers should not be under royal obligation for their daily sustenance." Outside, lightning flashed. Desiring and hoping that it would rain, Dharmaraja looked out of the window. Pulaha recited the sacred formula praying for the rains. The

two non-believers, Vrisha and Anaranya, laughed. That enraged Pulaha. The sea-waves, all of a sudden, smashed against the sandy shore. The dark clouds thickened in the sky. Arjuna sitting on the bank of Ganga stared at his own reflection in the water. Though his wounds had healed, and the mirroring water was disturbed by the rain-drops, Arjuna saw the scars left by the old wounds. The swishing of the cluster of Jondu plants on the river-bank filled the ears of Kunti in the upper storey of the house standing on the mound. Arjuna remembered that the shine on the long, metal bow he had rested against the wall of the room above the front-yard, had vanished.

Thinking that the shine could be recovered if the bow was washed in the rain, he climbed the steps to fetch it, and then placed it on the step outside exposing it to the rain. Pulaha said to Dharmaraja, "Maharaja, these two were of immense help to us in organising the cultivators to resist the royal plundering of their grain. They also played an important role in our organising an attack on the soldiers, which enabled us to save some part of our grain from being confiscated by the king's men. Otherwise they don't fit into our framework. They lack devotion and commitment." Dharmaraja asked, with a calm face but an angry tone, "Don't they believe in my commitment to Dharma?" Vrisha asked him bluntly, "You are angry, Maharaja. Do you think that it is humiliating to be accused of non-believing?" It thundered outside. A snake-like lightning illuminated the sky for a moment. On the bank of the stream stood two carts, covered with a mat, though it was raining. Inside one cart, there was the daughter-in-law in birth pains, the mother- in-law sat near her, massaging gently the young woman's waist. In the next cart sat huddled the grandfather with his grandchildren. The old woman shouted to her husband, "He must be working at the smithy. Go and fetch him." The old man ran in the drizzle. The waves rose high like mountains as Krishna stared at the sea. Dharmaraja ordered, "Sentry, hurry up and bring uncle Vidura here. If the rain increases in intensity, ask him to cover himself with a blanket and come."

Subhadra, hearing the cries of her daughter-in-law lying in the next room with birth-pangs, remembered the form of her son, Abhimanyu, as a baby. Shouting, "Our forest is on fire, it is catching on all around, in this winter, "men, carrying bows and arrows, and women carrying babies on their backs, were moving north, saying, "North is best, as there seems to be no fire there." Women also carried bows and arrows. He asked her, "Hiranyavati, haven't you learnt archery?" She replied, "Our forest was never on fire." There was smell of smoke everywhere. The dry leaves cracked beneath the walking feet. A few drops were still falling. The rain-drops falling rapidly splintered the surface of the river's water. To the right far away, stood Draupadi. Arjuna shouted to her, "Draupadi, why are you

standing like that in the rain? It is a winter rain. Please go up to the house." Her response was not even to look back at him. She went on staring hard at the river, dark as the clouds above. Her face was filled with indifference.

Arjuna sat in the patio, after climbing the steps with difficulty. He was running short of breath. In Krishna's mind the waves were rising from the opposite direction. Vidura left for the palace, covering himself with a blanket woven of elephant grass. Arjuna's metal bow got wet. Watching the bow get wet, Arjuna did not see Subhadra sitting in the patio opposite. Arjuna sighed. Kunti was all ears to catch the first cry of the baby coming into the world. The rain now became a downpour, its noise enveloping everything. In the downpour, the metal worker came running. Then he peeped through a small slit in the cover of the cart. His mother told him, "You should not see the scene inside. It is birth pain. Go somewhere and get a mug-full of warm toddy." He ran off again on the new errand. Neela told Bhima, "Maharaja, this is not the kind of rain that will stop within reasonable time. I have never seen such a forceful, roaring rain in winter before. We are stuck here, and cannot move out of here now." The two horses were shivering in the cold. The rain- drops had grown as large as balls. Also hailstorm. Suddenly something deep within Bhima J wanted to force itself out. He said to Neela, "Neela, I am not affected by cold and things like that. Covering myself with the blanket I can rush through the rain. I have now a better sense of direction. You stay here." Then he covered his head, shoulders, and back with a black blanket, and tied the strings of his leather foot wear. He walked away in the pooled water.

Krishna, all alone, went on staring at the waves. Kritavarma said to Krishna, "Didn't your Arjuna kill Bhurishrava through treachery? You, Krishna, didn't you join the enemies and help the destruction of our Yadava army?" Though Krishna tried to restrain him, Yuyudhana rushed against Kritavarma, who said, "Krishna, did not Abhimanyu, revengeful that I had not offered him my daughter Vatsala in marriage to him, kill her husband Lakshana and make her a widow? Therefore, it served us the right to kill Abhimanyu, as he harmed the house that fed him." Krishna stared at Balarama's face. Balarama shouted to Krishna, "Why do you stare at my face, you trickster?" Balarama's face turned red with the intoxication induced by the drink imported from overseas. Draupadi slowly climbed up the steps. From her disorderly hair, water dripped. In the face wet with dripping water, loneliness was writ large. Arjuna was gazing at the river. The white rain falling from the dark clouds splintered the dark waters of the river. The women folk of the Süta colony, who had come out to watch the rain-bearing clouds, felt suddenly sick in the stomach and sitting there, vomitted. One old woman shouted, "Each one of you will bear one hundred children in your wombs, all at

once! I can make it out from the force with which you are vomiting!"Draupadi continued to stand in the rain, her hair dripping water. Bhima said, "Yes, this is the boulder where I killed Hidimba, and where Salakatankati saw me first." Yes, Bhima had spotted it. Here, too, trees around had been burnt, their darkened stumps still standing.' Not possessing the strength of the root to soak in the rain, absorb its water and grow. Bhima suddenly looked at his own body and limbs. There were everywhere on his body dark scars left by the wounds acquired in the war. They decorated his face, neck, chest, thighs, shoulders. It was a sight to scare anyone away. He felt that if he were to stretch his hand and lift his grand-child, he would scream with fright on seeing his grand-father's scarred face. He thought, "From this point on, I know every detail of the landscape— ups and downs and boulders of different shapes, sizes and colours. I learnt that wandering in Salakatankati's company, holding her hand. Now her hair must have become snow-white, may be because of the death of her children or have I to break the news to her, standing before her." Then Bhima, looking down at the slippery ground, walked on. In the forest there was no sound of the falling rain. Everywhere there were fire-scarred dark stumps of burnt out tall trees, on which rain-drops fell gently. The black cinders flowed on the ground. The water had pooled on rain-wrought soil. It looked like the site of a cremated corpse after water had been poured over it. Arjuna, lacking the courage to ask her to go indoors, merely closed his eyes. From the inside of the house came Uttare's scream of pain penetrating through the patter of the rain." Rain has come. Let more of it fall, and let the fire be extinguished,

> Idatn vacah parjanyaya svardje
> Hrdd astvantaram tajjujosat

Hiranyavati proclaimed in her Aryan tongue, in a voice that cut through the swishing sound of rain-drops falling in on the leaves, to reach the clouds. He said, "You, what is this? Instead of running you have started screaming." She answered, "This is the ritual formula whose recitation causes heavy rainfall. The sky will empty its water and the forest fire will be quenched." The ruin fell. The heavy rain made thudding sound. Fall in on trees and plants, it created a swishing sound. It muted the smell of smoke and drove the fire on the trees under-ground. Saying, "You are the coward who assisted in the murder of Draupadi's sleeping children, who later fled in fear ", Yuyudhana attacked Kritavarma. Balarama's supporters fell on Yuyudhana. Rukmini's son Pradyumna came to the rescueof Yuyudhana using wine chalices as weapons,while the others used clubs, pounding pestle, sword, hammer, sickle. The other Yadava men drank the liquor from the overseas that was dashing against the shore. The blood flowed freely and became spray of drops. The

piercing cry from the body struggling with a new birth. Kunti said, running out, "Draupadi, at least you come and see what is happening. The poor girl, unable to endure the pain, is bathed in sweat. There is still no sign of delivery. Even the seasoned servant-maids are sitting helplessly."

Arjuna looked back. The rain had intensified. The trees stood burnt. Bhima said, "Salakatankati, I have come, I who had lived with you in the nest for one year. When I came here six months back, there were trees where sons and daughters nested. There was everywhere nothing but the forest but no forest fire. Oh! Salakatankati, Salakatankati, do you hear me? I am Bhima, I have come." Maybe her hearing had weakened due to age or the rain had swallowed up his words. He shouted, "Kamakatanakati, Kamakatanakati, "Nobody had survived. His heart began to beat when Bhima realised the prospect of none being alive. The rain poured continuously.. Because it was an elevated place, the rain water did not collect in pools on the ground. It was simply flowing down to lower levels. Bhima lifted his head to see the sky. The branches of old tall trees had turned black with burning and there was no sign of the bamboo houses earlier perching on their branches. Hoping against hope, he shouted once again, "Salakatankati, Salakatankati "to penetrate the sky beyond the rain-bearing clouds. The rain drops fell hitting his lifted face, eyes, nose and mouth, and then flowed to the head. Blanket-wrapped Vidura walked cautiously. The street overflowed with water and the feet could easily slip on that surface. All the dirt and waste had been washed away, smelling of water. Water leaked from his blanket. Arjuna continued to stare into the river. The water, so far dark and clean, had turned reddish with the inflow of dirt and filth. He wondered whether all the filth of the town had collected there through the rain. In the downpour with its ear-deafening roar, he wondered whether the town itself would be carried away by the water! With such thoughts, he looked up at the upper storey of the house! Then he remembered that it was a relatively newly built house." Don’t get wet. Get back to your huts." "Cover the children with palm branches." "Hiranyavati, shout more loudly your ritual prayer so that the god of rains will hear it!"Running about in the cold and rain meant sweating, hard breathing and retching. Finding herself unequal to the pain inside her flesh and lacking even the strength to cry out, Uttara stretched herself on the rack of birth pains,‘and screamed, "No, no "as the servant-maids rubbed her with oil.

The level of the water rose. Suddenly Arjuna was overpowered by the sheer quantity of everything — so many steps, so much filth and dirt, bamboo shoots, dead men, not male but female corpse. He stood up wondering which widow had jumped into the river. He rushed

into the water and swam, but only to find her dead. Maybe she wasn't quite dead as yet, but certainly with no strength to survive. He felt once again his breathing become difficult, and his body exhausted." Uncle, you must try to persuade the heads of the villages to believe in it. I have been telling them since the morning that I shall never loot and plunder their villages. All I ask of you is that you supply at the rate of one cartful of grain from each village. Fortunately, today the rains have started. Let everyone plough and sow seeds. I have assured them that I shall not ask for more than one-sixth of their yield as royal tax. Please go and convince them." Outside the palace, muddy, reddish water swept away all the dirt and filth and litter. There he saw a figure running against the rain, warding it off with his right hand, covering his forehead, and he bowed to him as if he was an old acquaintance. Bhima stared at him in total non- recognition. The new arrival said to him, "Maharaja, don't you recognise me? I accompanied Ghatotkacha and fought in the war. Perhaps you cannot recognise me."

As Bhima continued to stare with non-comprehension, he explained, "When my king died and all our men died, what could I do there alone? I left there, journeyed through the night and returned here. And when I come back what do I see? They had burnt our whole forest and turned into it a graveyard of dead and burnt out trees. All green has turned black." Bhima intervened and asked, "Who was responsible for it? Who?" He answered, "I don't know. I know some people personally in the villages of Panchala adjacent to our forest. When they came here to graze their cattle, I made enquires with them. They said it is the work of men from the Kuru side. From the Khandava region. This forest of ours stands on a very fertile soil. They wanted to burn it, cut it, and turn it into cultivable land. I know about this. But as long as our king, Ghatotkacha was alive, who had the guts to cross our boundary? We all went to the war on your behalf. All our men. Our queen Salakatankati sent all our youth to the front, assuring them that the women would take care of the defence of the forest. Well, seizing this opportunity, your Aryan folk rushed from two sides and set fire to the forest. Though winter, the twigs were dry. They had enough material to feed the fire. Well, the forest burnt for three days and three nights. Bhima intervened again and asked, "Where did the people here go? Women, children and babies at the waist?" The limitless dark clouds hammered the rain on all the battle-fields, flooding them. The water flowed into the river. The bones scattered everywhere, but the flow of the water pushed them towards one spot and deposited them there. The metal worker, carrying a mug of toddy in his hand, was there, dancing in the rain. Inside the covered waggon, the daughter-in-law screamed, "I can't bear it, "while the mother-in-law said to her, "You have the experience of bearing three children. What do you

mean, 'I can't'? Gulp a little of it, holding your breath, like this." Then the old woman shouted to her husband, "You, light the oven in that other cart and boil some water." The rain which had been quieter for some time, now became forceful, pounding the ground. He said to Bhima, "I thought they had all fled. I looked for them alone everywhere in the forest. I found many burnt human bodies, along with the burnt out bodies of tigers, cheetahs, boars and elephants. It was difficult to distinguish the human remains from the animal remains. I couldn't find my wife and little children, even dead, Maharaja!"

He began to weep with a loudness that broke through the roaring sound of the rain. Bhima spoke loudly, "Maybe you don't know the truth. All might not have died. Maybe they, at least some of them, may have fled to some other forest." He tried to gain courage and hope for himself by uttering such words. Refusing to run away from the reality, the man asked, "When the flames closed in on them from every side, how could they flee, Maharaja?" He resumed his weeping. Bhima shouted desperately with a thundering voice, "Salakatankati,Salakatankati, "till his word tore the sky's silence, and the nerves of his throat stretched tight and taut. Uttare sighed relief as the pain came to an end. The servant maid called Kunti and whispered in her ears. Kunti's eyes were filled with tears. She walked towards Draupadi and collapsed in utter despair. As she gave the news, "The still-born baby was at last pulled out." Then she broke into a cry. But the sound of the rain drowned her cry. He said, "Maharaja, I am waiting here, so that I can meet any of our people if they chanced to come this way. The forest had been so completely burnt that there is not even a single deer left for hunting. I shall live on the roots and berries. The ashes will dissolve in the water of the lake. Well, the rains have started. Later they will start ploughing. I shall wait for them to come, and then kill them one by one and feed on the flesh and blood of every one of those cultivators."

She started weeping loudly and said, "Child, Draupadi, after your five children were killed, this dead son, this baby, was the only hope for the perpetuation of our lineage." Arjuna looked at the steps from the upper patio. He did not now see the tall metal bow. The muddy, reddish water was flowing, carrying with it all litter. He got down quickly from the steps. Unable to endure the arrow-like rain-drops, he returned to the safety of the patio." You, lass, teach us also your rain prayer. The prayer that brings rain." Draupadi said, "Let us have Uttare undergo Niyoga, " trying to console Kunti, as she held her shoulders. Kunti nodded her head vigorously in protest, "No, no. No more of that now." The waves of the sea rose higher and higher. The tidal waves seemed to threaten the very survival of the new town of Dwaraka. Bhima asked with passion, "Child Barbaraka must be now one year old ? Is he alive or burnt in the fire?" His eyes filled with

tears and the throat got choked. Kunti asked, "Child, do you menstruate still?"

"Yes, why?"

Now you must be prepared to conceive. Otherwise this lineage will vanish, cut off forever"

Draupadi nodded her head. Her eyes flashed contempt. Then Kunti went near Subhadra." I said so many bodies burnt black, so many human bodies, many children. How can one identify their owners?" As rain-drops pelted the roof of the covered cart, the sounds made in the cart did not reach the other cart. The old woman screamed desperately, "Get me hot water. Didn't you hear the baby cry?" The old man lifted with bare hands the mug containing the boiling water from the oven and handed it over to his wife. Then getting wet, he peeped through the cover. Then he jumped with joy. Kunti returned to Draupadi again and, fondling her head, said, "Subhadra cannot conceive. Arjuna is past his prime. You are our only hope." "Look here, I am soaking in rain. I should be given atleast half a mug of toddy,"the old man pleaded.

In the pouring rain, flocks of women rushed into the royal court hall. Dharmaraja asked, "Who are they?" An old woman shouted the answer, "They are the village women who had been dragged to the front to entertain the soldiers. They got impregnated during the war. Their husbands refuse to take them back into the household. What should they do?" Dharmaraja watched them dumb-struck. There were so many of them, filling the hall and overflowing it. Then one shouted, "Maharaja , in the war fought on behalf of your lineage, we became pregnant through violence against our bodies. Whom should we call the fathers of the children we are going to deliver?" The rest joined her. Draupadi said, "What does it matter if this lineage dies out?" Kunti became furious and said, trying to exercise authority, 'No, you cannot say that. You must conceive. How can you who joined this lineage as a daughter-in-law say such wicked things?" Her eyes turn red in anger.

Not to be outdone, Draupadi looked more angry and her eyes burned redder as she countered Kunti with a deadly question, "Mother, how can you who came to this lineage as a daughter-in-law talk like that?" The sea rose in a crescendo. The waves invaded the city. All that Krishna could say, totally vanquished, was, "The city I built!"For a moment he remembered the widows filling the city. The son of the metal-worker, carrying his three children warming under the cart, danced in the pouring rain. The father thrashed the son again and again, chiding him, "You are getting the children drenched in the winter rain, you fool."

The water in the street rose knee-high. Then thigh-high. Utterly defeated and unable to answer the horde of women who had invaded his court hall, Dharmaraja sat helplessly watching the rain fall.

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The sculpture reproduced on the endpaper depicts a scene where three soothsayers are interpreting to King Suddhodana the dream of Queen Maya, mother of Lord Buddha. Below them is seated a scribe recording the interpretation. This is perhaps the earliest available pictorial record of the art of writing in India.

From : Nagarjunakonda, 2nd century A.D.
Courtesy : National Museum, New Delhi.

PARVA, A MODERN CLASSIC, IS A NOVEL BASED ON MAHABHARATA

The novel narrates the story of the Hindu epic Mahabharata mostly using monologue as a literary technique.

Several principal characters found in the original Mahabharata reminisce almost their entire lives. Both the setting and the context for the reminiscence is the onset of the Kurukshetra War.

Parva is acknowledged to be S.L.Bhyrappa's greatest work.Non-Kannadigas who have read it in it's Hindi and Marathi translations consider it one of the masterpieces of modern Indian literature. It is a transformation of an ancient legend into a modern novel. In this process,it has gained rational credibility and a human perspective.
The main incident, the Bharata war, symbolic of the birthpangs of a new world-order, depicts a heroic but vain effort to arrest the disintegration and continue the prevailing order.
It is viewed from the stand points of the partisan participants and judged with reference to the objective understanding of Krishna.

Narration, dialogue, monologue and comment all are employed for it's presentation. Shot through with irony,pity and understanding objectivity, the novel ends with the true tragic vision of faith in life and hope for mankind.

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S.L.Bhyrappa is one of the foremost Indian novelists writing in "Kannada" one of the Indian languages.
Author of more than twenty five novels. Four volumes of literary criticism and an autobiography. Dr.Bhyrappa is a major voice in the Indian Literary scene. Vamsa Vriksha, Daatu, Saakshi are some of his important novels.
Recipient of Karnataka Sahitya Akademi Award (twice),Sahitya Akademi Award and Pumpa Award from Govt of Karnataka. Dr.Bhyrappa represented India on several literary asssignments in various and parts of the world.

K.Raghavendra Rao (1928-2020), the translator of this novel was a Professor of Political Science. Has published a number of books in English and Kannada.
Spring Fire (Bendre's poems in English), *Modern Indo-Anglian Poems* (edited with P.Lal), *Modern Kannada Poetry* (edited with C.S. Kanavi), *The Peacock Smile*, a critical study of Bendre, deserve special mention.
He has published a number of books in English and Kannada.

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